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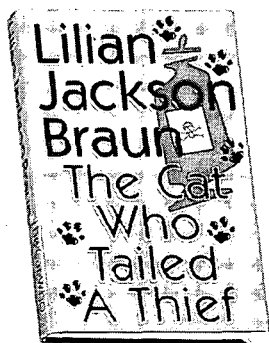
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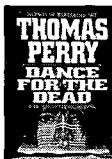
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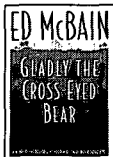
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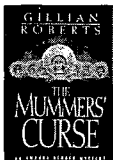
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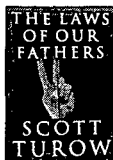
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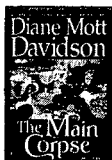
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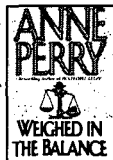
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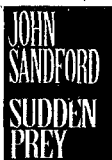
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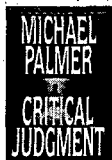
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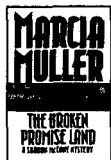
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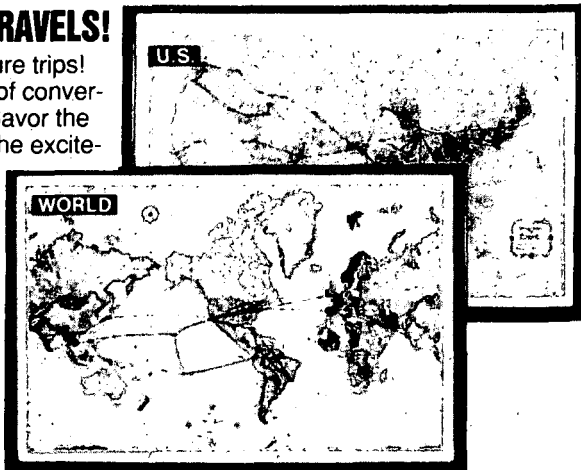
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

William T. Sampson, author of "All in a Day's Work," his first published fiction, is nonetheless a writer of long standing.

A Korean War veteran (U.S. Army Signal Corps) and a retired prize-winning copywriter for an advertising agency, account executive, and broadcast director who makes his home in Roanoke, Virginia, Mr. Sampson began his career as a continuity writer for the local NBC radio and television affiliate. He has written a weekly newspaper column called "Nature's Way" and still turns out the occasional newspaper or magazine article. A previous (unpublished) story received an honorable mention in the 1995 Mystery Writers of America's short story contest for new writers.

Mr. Sampson's particular interests include natural history (especially birds), amateur radio, photography playing jazz piano, and fishing.

Eve Fisher, author of "Grown-ups Are All Alike," is currently a South Dakotan, but she "was born in a small village in Greece which was destroyed by an earthquake; I was found in the rubble and placed in an Athens orphanage." Adopted by an American couple, she grew up in Southern California in the sixties and has since lived in Michigan, Georgia, Tennessee, and South Dakota, "which I like best of all."

Ms. Fisher has published one previous (nonmystery) short story and three one-act plays; one of them, "Stranger Song," was produced off-off-off Broadway in New York in 1991.

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FICTION

Roadkill Poker

Bill Crenshaw



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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/97

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“Oh hell, Bert,” said Buck, waving his can of beer at the exit inching toward them. “Turn off here.”

Bert wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and stared up the long line of traffic crawling I-75 ahead, bumper to bumper. For as far as he could see, the glass and chrome of the cars and trucks and vans and campers and buses threw shards of white Florida sun into his eyes. The air was dead calm, and exhaust fumes hung in a cloud around them, and traffic sometimes stopped completely, both northbound just lanes flat shut down. Getting off the interstate had a certain appeal.

Still. On the interstate he knew where he was and where he was going—a beeline straight north, away from Miami and Florida and a January hot enough to ride with the top down, and back home to sweaters and natural weather, even snow. And anyway, the last thing he wanted was to get lost with Buck on the blue highways of backwoods Florida. The trip had been bad enough already.

“It’ll clear up,” Bert said. “Probably construction again. Go back to sleep.”

Buck turned his sunglasses at Bert, their blue flashing making

him look alien. “Come on. Looks like *your* kind of exit. Absolutely nothing to do.”

“I’ve said I was sorry,” Bert said, knowing it was futile. Buck wasn’t going to stop grouching about the “We Dare to Bare” exit, some strip joint with billboards halfway to Tampa, beautiful girls, open twenty-four hours. Buck couldn’t wait, but he had had been asleep at the exit. Bert hadn’t stopped. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“No danger of fun here.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Buck pointed again with the hand holding the beer. “Then take *this* exit.”

“I wish you’d keep that can down. And I wish you’d buckle your seatbelt.”

“Do you, Laaaam-bert?” said Buck, making Bert’s name sound like a sheep bleating. “Okay, Laaaam-bert.” He drained the can and flicked it over his head, out of the convertible. It clanked onto the hood of the car behind them. The driver sat on his horn. Without turning Buck raised his arm straight up and extended his middle finger. Bert checked the mirror. The car’s door was opening.

“Damn,” Bert said, cutting the wheel and wrenching the car out of traffic and down the exit ramp, the sound of horn and curses fading.

Bert looked in his mirror

again. At least the car wasn't chasing them. "Jesus, Buck. You're gonna get us killed."

"Jesus, *Buckley*, you're gonna get us killed. Jesus, *Buckley*."

Jesus, Buckley, Bert thought, wondering why in the hell he had come on this trip. A year ago the trip had seemed like a good idea. A year ago—the high school football team together for their New Year's party, a winning season finished and the seniors reluctant to name the things that were over, especially football. Somebody said that they should all get together next year at the Orange Bowl, a team reunion. Everybody said great idea, but nobody believed it would happen. But then at graduation, Joe-nuts said his father was giving the seniors tickets to the Orange Bowl, a miracle unlooked for, and the trip seemed then like a great idea too, even to Bert, drunk with the rest of the team at the graduation blast, still in their green gowns, wearing their football helmets with tassels attached instead of the stupid little mortarboards. Hell yes, they all said, Orange Bowl next year, maybe one of us will play, one of *us*, and the rest of us will be there watching. A dream, they knew, but the dream enticed them—even, Bert admitted, enticed him.

But he knew now, Buck drinking and edgy beside him, that it

had been a terrible idea. He had known it before they even crossed into Georgia from upstate South Carolina, dropping like a stone down the long concrete chute to Miami.

At the bottom of the exit ramp Bert stopped the car and looked around. A couple of two lane state roads, an intersection that had been important before the interstate rose on its bridge above it, a couple of double-wide trailers, a convenience store with a sign that said STOP. EAT. GET GAS. Buck read it out loud and laughed and punched Bert's shoulder, punched a little too hard. Bert just smiled, his silence and his refusal to laugh his only rebellion.

But inside the store, when Bert was trying to choose one of the four kinds of hot dogs spinning slowly on their greasy rollers under the heat lamp, Buck reached past him and plucked one up and wagged it back and forth by one end. "Look," he said, "they dare to bare, too." And in spite of himself Bert laughed. After a semester of college, some things about Buck hadn't changed a bit.

Which was part of the problem.

Bert put the gas and the dogs on his credit card. So far he had put everything on his credit card. Outside he offered Buck

the keys, hoping he wouldn't take them.

"We're a team," Buck said. "You drive. I drink."

"How about we try 75 again?" Bert said, but they could see traffic still backed up on the bridge.

"We got this nice two-lane," Buck said. "No cops, no traffic. Put your back to the sun and head north. Beer?"

Bert shook his head.

The two-lane wasn't bad, Bert had to admit. Cooler, no smell of exhaust, trees or pastures or water on either side, sometimes even shade. Empty, except for a rare pickup truck or tanker or eighteen-wheeler making time on the back roads. Even Buck seemed to drift toward a better mood.

Bert hoped the mood would last long enough to get the hell out of Florida and back home. Not even back home. If he could just get Buck across the Georgia state line, he thought, things would straighten themselves right up. As long as they could avoid talking football.

He glanced over at Buck's right knee flashing in shadow and sun. A bright pink scar like a zipper on the inside of the leg. He looked at Buck's face. Buck was looking at him, sullen, as if he'd been following his glance.

Bert smiled. Buck tilted his

beer and turned back to the road.

Bert watched him out of the corner of his eye when he checked the mirror, looking for a sign, not knowing what he thought he might see. When Buck lost it, it was sudden, like those blinding tackles he had thrown in high school, those blitzes out of nowhere, on some hapless quarterback who would find himself pissing blood that night. What delighted Buck most were quarterbacks who didn't move after the hit. "He felt that, I betcha," Buck would say, counting off the seconds until the player raised his head or lifted an arm.

Not any more. Not with what was left of that knee, that seared streak of red over that ruin.

Bert hadn't even known about it until they hit the Florida line and the sun had become bright and warm and he had lowered the top on his high school graduation present, his red Mustang convertible, and Buck had peeled his jeans off and sat in the sun in his boxers, the scar screaming on his pale leg. Bert hadn't known until then that Buck was out of football, his knee shattered from the side as he blocked for a punter in a scrimmage. Not even a real game, Buck said, a freaking scrimmage, and he was hurt

and angry that Bert hadn't heard.

Not that Buck would say that. Not that he would even think that. What Buck said was, "All he had to do was stand there and let me take the hits." And Bert had known that Buck was really saying all you had to do was stand there, and that it was just a matter of beer before he said what he meant.

Away from the interstate, away from the tourist route paved wide and straight to sand and sinkholes, the landscape began to change, farmhouses going grey and infrequent, what out-buildings there were leaning as if gravity had shifted, ever-smaller stretches of sandy soil holding out between sections growing more swampy. The sun at last was maybe losing a bit of its heat. Another couple or three hours, maybe, and they'd be out of Florida and it would be cool again, like winter was supposed to be, and he could put the top up and Buck would put on jeans or sweatpants and there'd be no more scar.

He heard another beer hiss open.

"So, Laaaam-bert, Joe-nuts tells me you might not play ball next year."

Bert wasn't even going to touch that one. Buck was at the looking-for-a-fight stage. Let him get a little more drunk or a

little more sober, it would be okay. But don't walk into an outstretched fist, don't tell him that football was, well, just a game now, or that his time and interests were different. But say something.

"You ever play cow poker?" Bert asked. It sounded stupid. It was all he could think of.

Buck gave him the look, the famous look he had given in high school when Bert said something Buck thought was off the wall. He would give that look and get a laugh from whoever was there, and Bert, Buck's fool, Buck's intellectual gopher, would have served his purpose, amusing the BMOC, and he would belong. It had been something then to tag at Buck's shoulder in the halls, by the lockers, in the lunchroom, something to be popular. It had been worth the hours and hours punting down an empty field, retrieving all the balls, punting the other way, aiming for the corners and the quick twitch out of bounds. It had been worth kicking field goal after field goal, twenty yarders, thirty, forty, until he could drill the uprights in the dark, which is when he knocked off. Back then it had all been worth it.

"You mean," Buck said, "like, with cows?"

"You know, like when you were a kid. You get one side, I

get the other. Cows are one point, horses are two, tractors are five. First one to twenty-five wins."

"Cow poker." Buck gave him the look again, which was fine, was what Bert wanted. Playing the fool wasn't all bad. The fool was no threat.

Bert shrugged. "Yeah."

"Kid's game. You played it with your daddy-man. I'm not your daddy-man."

"A dollar a point, winner take all?"

Buck sat up a little. "Oh, Daddy."

"And gimme a beer, will ya?" Bert added.

Buck smiled and slapped a cold can into his hand. "Good man. Some stones left. Dollar a point. Winner take all. Beginning when you pop your beer."

Bert counted down, three, two, one, and snapped the top. Foam spewed onto his cheek. They laughed, and Bert tilted the can for a long icy swallow.

It was a slow game as the landscape continued its change. Things seemed abandoned.

A grey house by a sad pond, an old flat-bottomed boat upside-down in the sun, a broken ladderback chair.

A bleached motel, all the windows broken in the cinder block cabins, trees punching through the parking lot, but behind it acres and acres of cars rusting

away into weeds and leaking oil into the sand, like all the cars of all the people who had ever pulled in on their way down to see granny or Key West.

A huge crow over a dark shape in the road, lifting reluctantly into the air as they bore down on it, settling back to the roadkill, Bert noted in the mirror, as soon as the wind of their passing died.

"Horse," Buck yelled. "No, a mule. Two mules. That counts, right? Two points each?"

"Two points each," Bert said.

And Buck was grinning. Good. Bert felt himself grinning, too.

They saw no cows. They passed some more mules, some horses, a couple of tractors crawling a field of corn stubble or old cotton, a rusting combine hiding in a rusting barn, and after a dozen more miles nothing, nothing, the road a dark ribbon in the sun stretching through a V of green-black trees, empty, a heat mirage dancing at the far end. They passed stands of pines too thin for toothpicks, ditches covered in green scum and cat-tails, black water and thick clumps of grasses, a dead armadillo.

The score was twenty-two to twenty, Buck leading, when finally on the left, across a field of furrowed sand and briars, a bright green tractor, apparently brand new, sat with no tires.

Bert pretended not to see it. But Buck saw it.

"You win," Buck said. He counted fives and ones from his wallet. He held them out.

Bert raised the back of his hand toward Buck. "Nah, that's okay. I—"

Buck snapped the money at Bert. It hit him in the face and swept out of the car, floating in the slipstream toward the tar and ditches.

"You win, you simple son of a bitch," Buck said.

Bert's face stung. "Dammit, Buck, it's only a game." He wanted to hit him, wanted it more than he ever had, ever. He squeezed the steering wheel hard to keep from backhanding Buck across the mouth, because he knew that was what Buck wanted, knew that Buck was looking for an excuse to beat the living Jesus out of him. He pushed his foot down on the accelerator.

Buck looked behind them. "Turn around and get your money."

Bert said nothing.

"Turn around, Laaaaaam-bert."

Bert lowered his forehead half an inch and locked his eyes on the heat mirage ahead and accelerated. The right front tire began to shimmy a little, twitching the wheel in his hands.

"Damn it, Bert, that's not

right. You owe me twenty-five dollars."

"What?" Bert shouted, having to look at him now. "What?"

"I gave you that money, and you don't want it. I want it, so either turn around and get it or pay me twenty-five dollars."

Bert laughed. He couldn't believe it, and couldn't believe he laughed. He had never laughed at Buck before. Not to his face.

Buck popped him in the shoulder with the backs of his fingers, an insult, a prelude.

Bert raised a warning forefinger. "My money, right?"

Buck hesitated.

"Right?" Bert said.

"Right," Buck said.

"I just spent it. My money, it's gone. Mine."

For a couple of heartbeats Buck just stared, and then exploded into laughter that was a little too loud, Bert thought, and a bit too long.

"Okay, you simple son of a bitch," Buck said. "Your money. Gone. Now. How about double or nothing?"

You just can't lose, can you? thought Bert. Fine. He could play the fool again and make Buck happy, could play cow poker as many times as it took for Buck to win a game, just one game, and then whatever had been doubled, even a million dollars, would be nothing and he'd pay Buck the twenty-five

he'd left on the road and Buck would be happy. Best twenty-five he'd ever spend.

"Sure," said Bert. "Double or nothing."

Buck lifted a fist. "Startiinngg now." He dropped his hand.

They passed oaks dying under shrouds of Spanish moss.

They passed a long dirt road cutting through a dry pasture to a clump of trees in the distance, and under the trees a house almost hidden by bushes grown to the shattered end of a rust red roof.

Power lines ran beside them, going nowhere, ending suddenly.

They passed nothing alive.

The land was becoming wet and dry at once, larger stretches of low ground and swamp, the road built up into causeways above the ditches, bridges across sections of open water, not rivers, just water, black and still. Then the land again would rise briefly into that grey and sandy excuse for dirt, drained and dry and lifeless in the cooling sun except for the stagnant ditches, the water in places only inches below the road itself.

"No cows or horses," Buck said, "but every quarter mile another something dead." He made it sound like it was Bert's fault.

"Look, Buck, I'll pay you the twenty-five doll—"

"No no no, you won it, fair and

square, fair and square. You're always fair and square, Laaaambert. I just want a chance to win it back, that's all."

The interstate would have farms, Bert thought. He considered saying it. Cars and cows. Be patient, he could say, which would piss Buck off.

Bert watched a lazy column of buzzards spiraling on a thermal and a couple of hawks, lower and closer, standing still in a steady breeze, pinned to the sky above green-black pines.

Slim pickings for the hawks, he thought, unless they went for a buzzard. He pulled the car left a hair to avoid the furry smudge of a roadkill and didn't bother to pull back into his lane, the white lines slicing down the center of the car, the road endless before and endless behind, disappearing into the shimmering mirages where road and sky dissolved into each other. The pavement seemed to rise away from him in both directions, as if he drove at the bottom of a bowl, always going uphill, but the black water in the ditches on either side lay as still and undisturbed as granite.

Suddenly he felt exhausted, as if the weight of the trip had just settled on his shoulders.

Buck pointed to the road. "Damn, that must have been deer versus semi."

"I don't see a deer."

"Nah, man, that splatter. Like that one, only lots bigger." He pointed again and Bert saw a black stain, a blotch with a comet tail starburst blasting down the road.

"Blood," said Buck. "Like you hit a water balloon of blood. A blood balloon."

Bert hadn't realized that's what the stains were. He had assumed oil or antifreeze or something; he hadn't assumed anything; he had never thought about it. But now that he knew to look, they were everywhere and disgusting and intriguing, remnants of bags squeezed and exploded by a tire in the direction of motion, with tire prints fading away from them, little ovals of black stain growing fainter as the tire laid down the gore layer by layer until it was gone.

Buck pulled a beer from the cooler and stood up, balanced by his left hand grabbing the windshield.

"Would you sit down and buckle up?" Bert said.

Buck cocked his right arm back. "Should have been a quarterback," he said, and snapped a pass hard, low arc. The wind caught the can and dropped it fast to the pavement.

"Hit it!" Buck yelled, but the can was already zipping by, spewing a long stream of beer as

it rolled to a stop. Buck reached into the cooler.

Oh, Jesus. "That's my beer," Bert said.

"Your money, your beer, same place. Now hit this one, dammit. Roadkill splatter." He threw again, higher this time. The can sailed away, then seemed to start back as the wind slowed it and dropped it to the road. Buck reached down and jerked the wheel to the right toward the bouncing can. The tires hit the shoulder, dug into the sand. Bert fought for control, wrenched the car left too fast, felt his rear end coming around in a fishtail, steered back into the slide, came out of it.

Buck gave a long roller-coaster whoop, standing in the wind.

"Damn it, Buck. Goddammit."

"All you can do is sit there, isn't it, Laaambert? That's all you could ever do. Now *hit it*." He threw another, threw it high, too high, and it seemed to hang, then drop back toward them like a hawk stooping, and it crashed into the hood and exploded across the windshield in foam.

Bert stomped the brakes and left long black stripes on the road, and the car pitched screaming to a stop, Buck bent almost double across the windshield.

A moment of silence sur-

rounded Bert like a layer, silence and the smells of burned rubber; of warm tar, exhaust fumes, hot vinyl, beer; of fetid rot from the stagnant ditches. In the silence he thought that Buck would kill him. Then he heard Buck laughing.

"Get out," Bert heard himself saying. "Get out of my car."

Buck hit him on the right cheek, not hard, a left thrown off-balance, but in the face, like he'd done on the bus that time, a smack on the doggie's snout, remember your place.

"You coulda killed me," Buck said.

"Get out of my car. Get out of my car."

Buck popped a beer and settled into the seat.

Bert pulled the keys out of the ignition and opened his door.

"Laaambert," Buck said softly.

Bert opened the trunk and grabbed Buck's duffel and swung it as far as he could toward the mirage behind them. He had a backpack, too. Bert sneered. A backpack. As if he were a student. He sent it spinning after the duffel. What else?

"Oh, Laaaambert."

The voice was above him. Buck was standing on the back ledge behind the raised trunk. He reached down and pulled the keys from the trunk's lock. He smiled. "Brush it all off, and put it all back."

Not just his car keys. House keys. Library carrel key. His student I.D./key card with a pretty good picture and grin not too goofy, his new identity far away from Buck and locker-lined high school halls and pickup trucks and the taste of tobacco coming back up after Buck and his buddies made you swallow your first chew.

He looked up at Buck. The keys twinkled in the sun. "Screw you, Buckley," he said.

Buck snapped his wrist and the keys flashed away, spinning toward the green scum on the black water of the right-hand ditch. All Bert could do was stand, watching their fall. He'd never find them, never.

Somehow they cleared the ditch and landed just beyond the barbed wire on the other side.

Bert smiled to himself and walked straight toward the ditch, all dignity and control, he thought, straight into the water without a break in his stride and within two steps was up to his neck as the bottom just dropped away and he lost his balance. It smelled septic, the green of the scum unnaturally bright, a cloud of insects rising around him.

Buck was laughing. "Water moccasin," he yelled, and in spite of himself Bert thrashed his way back to the near side, and Buck hooted and howled.

Bert stood dripping and kept his back to him, searching for a way over. The span of water was as wide as the highway and just as opaque. There might be snakes. There might be anything.

He could see the keys glint from the tangled undergrowth on the other side, a thicket of briar and weed and brush and gnarled trees twisting up, fighting for untainted air. The fence made no sense, was fencing nothing in or out as far as Bert could see, was just there. Water ran down the backs of his legs, and his shirt stuck to his chest.

Buck's laughing stopped. Bert resisted the temptation to turn. He looked up the road and down, hoping to catch Buck in his peripheral vision, but saw back the way they had come maybe an access road across the water. He trotted towards it, his feet squishing in his shoes, his good Nikes, damn' Buck anyway.

It was a one-lane strip of sand across two huge culverts in the ditch, a narrow driveway inches above the water, the tops of the culverts barely clearing the scum. The driveway ended at the fence and the undergrowth. It made no sense. Nothing on this road made sense. Nothing in the whole state made sense as far as he could tell. He wanted to be home.

He crossed the driveway and

picked his way through the briars and brush escaping the fence and drew even with the car, but he had lost the keys. They had to be right here.

"Bert," Buck called.

Bert ignored him.

"Bert," Buck said.

Bert turned. Buck was pointing to his left. Bert followed the line and saw the keys.

He wavered between calling Up yours and Thanks. He lifted his hand. "Got 'em," he called.

Back at the car Buck was holding a towel and a beer. "Sorry, Bert. That wasn't fair."

Bert took the towel without saying anything.

"Look, you want me to fall in the ditch? I'll go fall in the ditch."

"You're crazy."

"That make you happy?" He handed Bert the beer and walked to the edge of the ditch. He turned to face Bert. "Well?"

It took Bert a second to realize that Buck was tilting, falling straight back into the water as if he were a mannequin, splashing into green and black and disappearing for a second except for his toes. He emerged dripping and streaked with pond scum. "Well?"

"You are crazy," said Bert. He tried to smile.

"Use that towel when you're done?"

Bert tossed him the towel.

"Let's roll," Buck said. "Let's get back to poker."

"There aren't any cows," Bert said.

"Not cow poker," said Buck. "Roadkill poker."

Bert fumbled through the keys. The ignition key wasn't on the ring. He looked again. Not there. It must have fallen off. How could it have fallen off? They'd never find it, God, never. He'd have to look anyway. He opened the door.

Buck was smiling. Buck was just looking at him, smiling. Then he opened his fist. The key.

"Damn it, Buck."

Buck laughed.

"Damn it," Bert said. He realized that Buck had thought about driving away and leaving him when he was looking for the keys. "Why didn't you just take off?"

"Because you stuck with me in Miami," said Buck. "Now we're even."

Only in Buck's mind, Bert thought, could not stealing a car be considered returning a favor.

So they sped north, the wind cold now in their damp hair, looking for dead things in the road. Stains didn't count. Something had to be left, Buck said, some fur, some feathers, something. They divided the road at the white line and if something was dead on the line, whoever

had most of it got the point. One point for mystery kills, Buck said, two points if you could tell what the thing was. You get something like a deer, five. "You kill it yourself," Buck added, "ten points and we switch drivers."

Bert laughed at that. It was hard not to laugh with Buck sometimes, and sometimes he liked him, but this trip, he knew, was it. The roads had forked and they were drifting apart and that was fine. It was the way things were.

The snake was clearly a snake still, flat and twisted but a snake, and gave Buck the first two points. A string of one-pointers after that, a bit of something stuck to the road in a stain, maybe fur, maybe bone, but no telling from what. Lots of empty stains, picked clean, Bert assumed, by crows or buzzards, but fewer stains with point value, PV, as they quickly called it, and the score climbed with the miles, slowly but with Buck mercifully in the lead.

Bert wanted Buck to win. Buck needed the win. He didn't. Buck was never so pleasant as when he was winning, when he could be gracious in victory to the underlings around him. Bert had learned quickly on the team to give Buck some room after a loss, after a bad play even. He had also learned never to let

Buck win, or never to let him know you let him win. It had to at least look like a contest. So when Buck called out, "PV," on an iffy stain at the right shoulder, Bert said, "No way," which made Buck mad in that good way, that competitive way.

"Turn around," Buck said.

"No points," said Bert.

"Side bet," Buck said. "Five dollars."

Bert stopped the car and backed the half mile to the spot. They got out and leaned over the stain. A sliver of tissue, a wisp of fur. Buck popped Bert in the chest with the back of his hand, playfully this time, man to man. "Fiver. Pay up."

Perfect, Bert thought. He counted out five ones. He could let Buck win the game, jolly him out of his black mood, like always. Only it rankled.

Another armadillo. A dog. What the hell a dog was doing out there they didn't know. A skunk that left smell as well as fur by the cattails backlit and glowing above the green scum. A crow in Bert's lane, one black wing extending toward the sky as if trying to pull the rest of the crow from its fusion with the roadbed. More things dead in Bert's lane now. Bert's score caught Buck's. Bert went ahead. Bert was glad, in a way, but he still wanted Buck to win.

Buck fished out the last beer

and offered it to Bert. Bert shook his head. "You know, I'm proud of you, really," Buck said after his first pull. "I mean that scholarship and all."

Bert looked over to see if Buck was serious or setting him up for something. Buck was looking straight down the long road.

Bert cleared his throat. "Thanks, Buck."

"You know, I think," Buck said, still looking straight ahead, words just a bit slurred, Bert noticed, a bit slow, "I think it, sometimes I think of it, like, as our-scholarship, you know? All those times I blocked for you and all so you could make all those field goals and all those great punts." He punched Bert's arm. "Great punts, Ratman," he said, using Bert's team nickname for the first time on the trip. Bert had always hated it, but now it tightened his throat.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Brick," said Bert.

"Yeah." Buck rubbed his scar. "Brick."

A flattened shape came at them on the white line, indefinable. "Your point," said Bert.

"Bull. Your point. Don't screw with the game."

Bert made a show of checking the rear view. "You're right. My point."

"That's what gets to me. You got no respect for the game.

Hell, you don't even like the game."

Bert didn't say anything.

"You coulda gone to Clemson. You could be playing ball for Georgia, for the Gators. You could play for the freaking Gators, man, and you're up there kicking for what the hell is their name anyway?"

"The Lions. The Columbia Lions."

"What kind of name is that? What kind of team is that? What the hell kind of school is that, Bert, in New York City, Jesus H., in Harlem. What the hell did you go and do that for?"

"Look, Buck—"

"You always were too good for us, weren't you? All you had to do was stand there and let us take the hits. Anybody could kick good behind the Brick. I took the hits meant for you, and you take a limp-wristed scholarship, and you don't even like the game, and I take a hit for some kicker in a scrimmage, and I'm out."

Bert kept his eyes on the road. In the distance, from the mirage, like a ship on the far horizon, Bert thought he saw a dot emerging. He said nothing.

"And what happened in that Spartan High game?" Buck said, knowing what had happened. "The state title right there, in our hands. All you had to do was stand there. What'd you do? You

look up? You see 'em coming? I *always* see them coming, Laaambert. Every time I look up, I see them coming at me. And what's between them and you is me."

A roadkill zipped by on the line.

"PV, mine, a fox, two points," said Buck.

"Mine," said Bert. "Unknown. One point. Don't screw with the game, Buckley."

Bert could see Buck's head turn toward him. "Oooo, Bert. Side bet. Back up."

"Don't need to back up. My point, Buck. You know it."

Buck drained his beer and crushed the can and tossed it out of the car. No more beer. That wouldn't make him happy. Tough. Too damn bad. Get over it. Bert's stomach felt funny, light. He liked it. He couldn't resist. "Three points, and I win."

The dot ahead wasn't a car. It was a guy on a bicycle, headed their way, helmet, panniers slung over the wheel. Bert was still straddling the white line. He started easing right.

"There's your winning point, Laaaambert. *Get him.*" And Buck grabbed the wheel and pushed up and left harder, maybe, than he meant to.

The cyclist hit the windshield first, a starburst of spidered glass, and flipped over Bert's head and hit the trunk before

disappearing and then reappearing in the road, receding as the undercarriage dragged what was left of the bicycle screaming beneath it.

Bert stopped the car. The road was empty except for the shape in the road behind them.

Bert couldn't breathe. "Jesus, Jesus. Buck, what did you do?"

"Back up! Back up!"

Bert threw it into reverse, and the bicycle howled and wedged under the left front wheel. Bert swore and started forward, but Buck jumped out of the car and ran toward the cyclist. Bert floored the accelerator and the bike howled again and tore free. He put it in reverse. Buck was waving at him to hurry. Bert backed fast, slowing as the car began weaving. Buck was standing beside the shape, looking down.

"He's alive," said Buck. "Should we move him?"

Oh God, oh God. "I don't know."

"We're not supposed to move him. We're supposed to wait on the ambulance."

The road was a black arrow in both directions, fusing with the sky.

Bert looked down at the man. A helmet. A cycling jersey. Cycling gloves. There wasn't much blood. His breathing seemed funny. "We've got to move him. He's going to die."

"You're not supposed to move him."

"He's dying, Buck. Help me." Bert kneeled down at the man's head. He didn't want to touch him.

Buck giggled. "You win."

Bert hit him, hard, low, a solid tackle, driving Buck back and down onto the tar and gravel and pinning his shoulders under his knees. "Shut up, Buck, shut up shut up. We've got to move this guy." He could feel Buck's muscles going solid beneath him.

"Get off me, Lambert." Buck's voice was almost a whisper.

Bert stood and offered Buck a hand. Buck ignored it.

They eased the cyclist into the back seat, trying to keep him in the same position as they found him. Bert told Buck to ride in the back and hold the guy's head straight to keep his spine protected and so he wouldn't choke on his own vomit if he threw up.

"You said he was dying."

"You're too drunk to drive."

"I'm not drunk."

"Oh God, Buck, just do it, Buck."

Forward seemed the only way, north, the way they had been going. They knew there was nothing behind them for miles.

"It's his own freaking fault," said Buck. "What the hell is he

doing out here on a bicycle?" He raised his voice. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Bert realized Buck was yelling at the cyclist. "How's he doing?"

"He's dying, you said. You said he's dying."

He *was* dying. Bert knew it. Sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five miles an hour, speeding by road-kills and swamp and sand into nothing. Eighty. The wind howled.

"Something's wrong with his eye. Bert! Bert!"

"What?"

"Something's wrong with his right eye. It's getting bigger."

Bert angled the mirror down; but all he could see was Buck's face; pale and tight.

"Big," Buck shouted over the wind. "Pupil. Like huge. Like his whole eye is a pupil."

Eighty-five. Pointless. Nothing they could do.

Over the engine and the wind and his own fear he could hear Buck yelling. "Don't you die, goddamn you. Goddamn you, don't you die." And he could hear another sound, a smacking sound.

He looked in the mirror. Buck was hitting the cyclist.

"Don't you die, you simple son of a bitch!"

"Buck, don't hit him. Buck. Dammit." He touched the brake to get his attention and pitched

Buck forward. "Don't hit him, dammit."

"He's twitching. Bert! He's like seizing. Bert!"

Bert straddled the white line and craned quickly. A seizure. He pressed the accelerator, but there was no place for it to go.

Buck climbed over the seat.

Bert jerked his thumb. "Get back there."

"What for?"

He was right. Nothing would do any good. Roaring down the empty road pointlessly, helplessly, but roaring until Buck said the guy wasn't twitching any more, wasn't breathing. Then he took his foot off the gas and let the car drift, drift to a stop.

The sun was behind the trees now, the light split by trunks and limbs and twigs, obscured and reddened by smoke from a swampy field smoldering to their left, smoldering for days, forever. Bert sat, hands on the wheel, staring down the long highway. The air was cooler. The heat mirage was gone. The road made a long V to the vanishing point, a funnel into nothing. He realized that Buck was standing in front of the car, looking at the front end.

"Not too bad," Buck said. "Try the headlights."

Bert's hand pulled the lights on.

Buck nodded. "Good. Turn signals."

Bert shifted the lever up. Buck nodded. Down. Buck nodded.

"Okay, cut her off."

Bert twisted the ignition key. Buck disappeared beneath the front end. Bert was alone. Silence. No breeze, no water moving, not even an insect. The tick and ping of a cooling engine. His own breath. From the back seat, nothing at all.

Buck's voice came from nowhere in particular. "Looks good. Radiator's okay, oil pan's dented but no leaks. Brake lines okay. Gas line okay." He rose again into view. "Steers okay, right?"

Had it? "Yes," Bert said.

Buck nodded, wiped sweat from his eyebrows. His hand was trembling. "We were lucky."

Lucky.

"You okay, Bert?" Buck was looking at him through the starburst in the windshield.

The image of accelerating over Buck flashed into Bert's mind and was gone. He shook his head. "Yeah, I'm okay." He sat up straight and looked around. "Yeah. Are you?"

"Can you turn it around?"

Bert looked at the shoulders. Soft, and not much there before they dropped down to the swamp. More than a three point turn, maybe, but yeah. "Sure."

"Okay, pull up and I'll guide you back."

Bert cranked the Mustang and used the side mirrors so he wouldn't have to see between the seats.

"C'mon back," Buck was saying. "C'mon back."

Bert stopped. "What are we doing?"

Buck was waving him back still.

"What are we doing?" Bert said louder.

Buck's hand was still in the air. "Going to get the bike. C'mon back."

A fog thickened in his head. He was numb, as if he had taken the kind of hit that kept him on the field after practice, kicking those field goals so he'd never have to run the ball again.

Buck appeared at his elbow.

"Bert. What the hell? Let's go."

Bert looked up at him. Buck was still pale. "Why the bike?"

"We can't just leave it there. You got a better plan?"

Bert didn't have any plans at all, so he backed it around and they headed the way they'd come. The wind was much cooler now, blowing the fog out of Bert's head.

"Why are we getting the bike again?"

Buck looked exasperated. "Okay, what then? You tell me."

"I don't know what."

"Lookit, Bert. This guy's dead."

Dead. Jesus. The fog was gone. "Damn it, Buck, why did you *do that*? Damn you, Buck."

"You were driving. You hit him."

"You jerked the wheel, you—"

Buck hit him in the shoulder, hard. "You shut up, Laaambert. You listen. This guy is dead. He's dead. You can't bring him back. Now we're going to get the bike and we're going to drop him and the bike off a bridge into that black water and we're going to get the hell out of Florida and never come back."

"You can't do that."

"Then you tell me what to do, Mr. Ivy League, Mr. Place Kicker. You tell me. You going to the cops? Yes, officer, we're sorry we hit this guy, here's the body, adios, got to get back to school? Oh sure, they say, Mr. Important Person, let me open the door for you. Right."

"It was an accident," Bert said.

Buck snorted. "Tell it to the judge."

"I didn't do anything wrong," he said.

He was aware that Buck was watching him.

"Oh, please, Your Honor," said Buck in his bleaty Laaambert voice, "it's not my fault; my friend did it."

"That's not what I said."

"That's what you meant."

"Did anybody else stick with you? Did anybody else bail your sorry ass out of jail after you got thrown out of the Orange Bowl? The Orange Bowl, Buck. And now . . ."

"What do you care, you never . . ."

"... there's a body in the back seat of my car. We killed him, Buck."

"I killed him, you mean."

"Shut up, Buck. Just shut up."

Buck turned away and crossed his arms. Thank God, Bert thought. Now he could think.

Everything narrowed to the road ahead. Maybe Buck was right. What else could they do?

The bike couldn't be too far, he was sure, even though it seemed like they had driven forever, had been driving this road forever, it had to be within a couple of miles. And then what? Turn around; drive up the highway with a body and a mangled bike to the next town? What was the next town? What if the next town were in Georgia? What if you took a body across the state line?

His horizons had been opening. That was the sense he'd had all year at school, the sense of vast, unthought-of spaces opening up, horizons falling away in every direction, possibilities endless. And he had been aware

on this roadtrip how Buck's horizons were constricting, Buck's world closing in and limiting choices and possibilities. But now his horizons and Buck's horizons were the same and were closing around them both, imprisoning them in the same tiny little world, this infinite thin line of blue highway.

His thoughts were crazy, going nowhere. Bring it back. Focus. Yes. Town. Authorities. No other choice. He glanced at Buck. He hadn't moved. No other choice. He couldn't live the rest of his life wondering if he'd be caught for something that Buck had done. Buck had done it, he hadn't meant to, really, but he *had* done it. And if it came to it, came to a trial, he'd testify against Buck, if he had to. Oh, he'd have to, all right. No question.

Bridge coming up. He remembered the bridge. Close to the bike now. He heard Buck's seatbelt click. He looked over, but Buck was still looking away. Yeah, he'd have to testify against Buck, and he'd win. He'd be a better witness than Buck. Buck would . . .

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye as Buck twisted sideways in his seat, his shoulders wedged against the door, and drove his left foot into Bert's right knee; jamming Bert's foot against the brake

pedal so that the knee took the full force and lightning crashed into Bert's leg, pain like he'd never known, so much pain that he wasn't fully aware of the car scraping and grinding its right side down the bridge guardrail, screeching, sparks shooting out, streaming out like the pain in his leg, like his voiceless screams. Even after the car had stopped, he couldn't breathe.

Buck was out of the car. Buck was behind him. Buck was opening his door and dragging him onto the pavement. Buck was opening the trunk.

Bert tried to sit up. He could almost make sense of what Buck was saying.

" . . . give me up for this, and you'd win, too; wouldn't you, you simple son of a bitch, Ivy League, bailed his old buddy out of the drunk tank. They'd believe you. Nothing personal, Laaambert, but it's me or you."

The trunk slammed. Buck had a tire iron in his hand. He started toward Bert. Bert tried to use his good leg to push himself away.

"After you ran over the guy," Buck said, "and I tried to take the keys, you tried to kill me, but I wrestled the tire iron from you and donged you and damned if you weren't dead, but I drove like hell to the nearest place trying to save your life."

Buck was at his feet now,

towering over him, holding the tire iron gently. "Now you know how my knee felt." And he allowed the tire iron to swing down across the knee again and all Bert could see was pain and ending the pain might be all that mattered. "Now you see."

Buck lifted his foot to step forward, bringing his arm back for a solid blow to Bert's head, and Bert swept with his good leg and caught Buck off balance and took him down hard on his back to the road. His head thunked like a melon as the tire iron clanged away toward the car.

There was a moment when nothing moved, when the universe was frozen and Bert had the brief hope that Buck was dead himself. But then Buck got his breath and said from his back, "Now it is personal."

Bert pushed backwards toward the bridge railing. Buck tried to sit up, making it to his hands and knees and stopping, head down, bleeding from the back of his head. So Buck was hurt, too, good, good. But if Buck killed him, Bert realized, the injury would only lend credence to the story Buck would tell.

Buck began vomiting between his hands on the road.

Bert reached the rail. He pulled himself up enough to get his left leg under him and push himself all the way up, losing his breath again in the pain.

Buck raised his face.

"Buck," Bert said. "This is crazy."

Buck lowered his head and threw up again.

Buck would kill him. He knew it. That was the way the game played out. Somebody was going to answer for that dead cyclist. Bert alive, Buck answers. Bert dead? Well, Buck had better odds then, didn't he? Buck would kill him for sure.

He couldn't just stand here, waiting. He had to do something. He needed a weapon, needed that tire iron, get it now while Buck was still down, or hop over and drop his knee on the back of Buck's neck and drive his face into the road. If he waited, if he waited . . .

Bert pushed himself away from the guardrail.

Buck lifted his face.

Bert stood balanced on one leg. He had waited too long. "Buck . . ."

Buck rocked back onto his feet and stood up, weaving. He found the tire iron.

"Come on, Buck. I helped you out."

Buck lurched toward him.

Bert leaned his weight hard into the guardrail and arched over backwards. Sky whipped past and then trees and then he hit the black water flat, face, belly, groin, and he sank. He came up sputtering. He saw

Buck's arm flash, and the tire iron smacked sideways across his shoulders, blasting his breath out, and he sank again and didn't care he was sinking, easier to sink.

He came up in the darkness under the bridge. He gasped in a breath, certain that Buck could hear. His legs were still low in the water. He kept his head tilted back and took in air as quietly as he could. The water stank, like floating in a sewer. He breathed through his mouth only. His legs felt like fishing weights, dragging him down. Something brushed his back, and he flinched away. There could be snakes in this water, white-mouthed moccasins in the black, there could be alligators cruising the inky water like logs, smiling under the surface. He was only ten yards from the fill rocks and dirt and sand under the end of the bridge. He dog-paddled toward it with panic snatching at him from below.

A giant splash to his left. He clawed his way out of the water and looked back and saw ripples spreading from a spot just beyond the bridge, a spot close to where he had hit.

Buck was in the water, coming in after him.

No.

That made no sense.

What then?

Buck had fallen in?

No.

The cyclist. Buck had dropped the cyclist off the bridge. Bert stared at the bull's-eye target of the widening and flattening ripples. Nothing rose to the surface.

Maybe Buck was testing to see if Bert's body would rise. Maybe he was going to claim this was where Bert dumped the cyclist and had tried to kill him. That was it. Had to be.

But Buck wouldn't assume that Bert had sunk. He was checking both sides of the bridge now, Bert was sure he was, and it wouldn't be long before he checked under the bridge.

The fill dirt inclined up to the bridge and maybe left a little dark cave at the top. Bert couldn't tell from where he was. It didn't matter. He didn't have a choice. He couldn't swim away. There was no place to swim. If he could float into the woodline, what good would that do, lost in a swampy jungle with one leg? He'd rather die where he was.

There was nothing at hand he could use as a weapon except fill rocks, too big to throw, and even if he had something Buck could sit a few feet away and laugh or bring back something himself, a stick, the jack from the car.

He heard the trunk slam shut.

Buck was on his way with something from the trunk.

He bit his lip against the pain and crawled up the incline, his right leg dragging over skull-sized stones. At the top the bridge became a roof over five narrow caves walled by the concrete supports of the slabs making up the bridge. He leaned into the one nearest. Too dark to see far. There were small bones under his hands. Maybe something lived there.

He thought he heard Buck call his name.

He flattened out and dragged himself inside.

He crawled six or eight feet, until the roof was too low to go any farther. He twisted onto his right side and drew his left leg up. If Buck came far enough in to see him, he could kick him in the face, maybe break his nose, maybe kill him.

He could see a little grey light below him as if he were floating high above a patch of luminescent fog. He could hear nothing except blood in his ears. He had no idea how much time was passing, where Buck was, what Buck was doing.

His clothes were wet. He was cold. He started to shiver.

Buck was looking for him, that's what. Buck knew where he was. Buck was going to gather rocks and wood and sand and muck and mud and wall him in

here and wait while he used up the air molecule by molecule and died in this cave. He could feel dust in his nostrils, stirred up by his breath. He was breathing faster. Buck didn't need to wall him up, there was no circulation in here, he'd use up the oxygen himself, die right here like a dog under a bridge over a backwater Florida swamp, dying in the dark in the sunshine state.

He had to calm down or he would scream or crawl out right into Buck. He went into his football zone, his kick zone, he called it, the place he went in his head on the field, the field not a dark and airless little cave, the field a bright and airy world of its own, and noise and life everywhere, and everything focused down to a point, a ball. It was the only reason he liked playing. He hated football, hated his bruising teammates and their slamming ideas of victory. What he liked was the precision of the kick itself—the rhythms, the snap of the ball, the placement, his driving foot, and the moment of contact, the universe reduced to the sound of his foot on the ball and the feel of the ball on his instep, and the ball lifting through gravity and wind and the earth's slow spin, tumbling, steady and precise, to the spot he had directed it to, time slow-

ing and stopping and watching, too.

He heard a car start, no, felt a car passing over him. Had to be Buck. If it had been another car, he would have felt it longer, it would have hit the bridge at speed and vibrated down its whole length. This one began close. Buck was leaving. Buck thought he was dead.

Or maybe that's what Buck wanted him to think so he would limp out onto the road where Buck could finish him off.

He'd wait to make sure. He'd wait until Buck gave up and drove off home. Buck would leave soon. Buck was never one for patience, was he? He'd get tired of waiting down the road and assume Bert was dead and drive off, and then Bert could come out and wait for a car or a truck.

In the meantime he'd wait here. The shivering had stopped. The pain had lessened. He was tired. He'd just wait. That's what he always did, Buck said. You just stand there. You just wait behind the Brick wall.

He imagined Buck driving away, the car now damaged and hard to drive, a slow leak in the front tire finally pulling him to the side, or maybe a hole in the radiator he'd missed, and Buck stopping on the shoulder, stuck on the road. Something coming, a truck, a tanker, pulling over to

offer a hand to the bleeding Buck and the scarred and dented Mustang, the driver leaning over the engine, and Buck cracking the driver's skull and climbing into the tanker's cab, grinding through the gears, roaring back to the bridge, stopping and unhooking the tank and pulling the cab off the bridge and then opening the stopcocks and ten thousand gallons of gasoline spilling over the sides of the bridge, pouring through the rain drains and into his cave, filling the river, and then the guttural hiss of the highway flare spinning backwards through its high arc from Buck's hand, the river igniting before the flare even hit, a wall of fire in a titanic explosion of noise and heat and light and—

Bert jerked awake. He was shivering. He heard the sound of traffic fading overhead, felt the vibrations of the bridge diminish. Traffic. He could have gotten help.

He was dead if he stayed where he was. He had to move.

He kept low on the bank, crawling along beside the roadbed, half in the water, before daring to ease up behind a thick clump of dead grass to check the road out. Nothing in either direction.

He tore five or six strips from his shirt and tied what was left tight around his knee. He half-

waded, half-swam back across the ditch to the barbed wire and broke and twisted a couple of limbs from a gnarled and dying oak. The wood was barely sound. He used the strips of cloth to tie the straighter limb to the outside of his leg, a knee brace. He almost laughed. Football injury. The other limb would be a staff.

He checked the road again. Still nothing.

He climbed to the roadbed and tested the leg. It hurt. Too bad. No choice.

Which way to go?

No choice there either, as far as he was concerned. North, the way he had been going.

He started north.

He was most afraid that Buck would catch him on the bridge. If he heard a car and he was halfway across, what would he do? Buck could nail him on the bridge, make him another road-kill, but in the water, he would surely die, too.

It was a long bridge.

He started across. Pain shot through his leg with every step. His knee was swelling.

He made himself concentrate on Buck to forget about the pain. Buck wouldn't catch him on the bridge, he told himself. Buck had to go for help, had to appear to go for help, and the longer he looked for Bert, the less credible his story would

sound. So if Buck were smart, he'd be laying his story out for some disbelieving cop in some one-room police station in a dinky Florida crossroads that called itself a town. If Buck were smart, that's what he'd do.

If Buck were smart.

Halfway across the bridge. His stomach felt empty.

What if Buck weren't smart?

He's smart, Bert thought, denying his fear. Smart enough to plan it out, to buckle up and wait for the bridge to kick Bert's knee, knowing the guardrails would keep them in the road and out of the water if Bert lost control, as he had done.

No, he thought. If he'd been thinking, he would have waited until we got to the bike and just conked me from behind. The bridge was stupid. And he might have gone back for the bike, and he might be behind me now.

He walked faster. He couldn't count on Buck playing it smart. He could only count on Buck wanting him dead. He knew suddenly that whatever this was with Buck, it had always been personal. He realized that he was to Buck the embodiment of everything that Buck felt worked against him, held him down, denied him what was due him. Buck hated him, had always hated him, hated him more for sticking by him than he

would have if he had just left him puking in the drunk tank.

Bert was almost a mile beyond the bridge when he heard the car behind him. He turned. It was too far to tell.

The roadbed was closer to the ditches again, only a couple of feet above the water. He had to get off the road and over to the fence and hide in the tangle of brush and briar.

He stumbled down the shoulder and into the water, afraid of stepping in over his head again, and then the bottom did drop away and he lost his balance and went under. But it was only about three feet deep, and from his knees he could lift his face to the surface and breathe and hope that he hadn't been seen.

The car roared by.

He lifted his head. It wasn't Buck. He scrambled out into the road, dragging his leg, waving and shouting, but the car was a dot in the distance, speeding away.

He was wet and cold again. The water he dripped into the road was like an old bloodstain from a long gone roadkill.

He felt despair rising. He couldn't hide or he'd miss help; he couldn't stay in the open because it might be Buck.

He kept moving, foot-staff, step-limp, step-pain. He would just have to keep moving until

he couldn't move. Then he'd stop moving.

The road kept sinking until it was almost even with the ditches, the water still stagnant and stinking and always there. Bert was really cold now, shivering and unable to stop. Keep moving, he told himself. Lie down, he told himself. Something scurried in the grasses beside the ditch.

His staff snapped, and he went down hard on the bad knee.

That's it, he thought. *That's all*. He lay on the warm surface of the road.

But he got up again. He needed a new staff. He couldn't think of the miles ahead of him, the emptiness around him, but he could think of finding a new staff. If he could find one of those access roads, one of those little driveways to nowhere, he could cross the ditch without getting wet again. He picked up the longer half of the old staff for a club and walked on, looking for an access road across the ditch.

He passed one before he saw it, most of it an inch or so under water, but looking back he saw it end at the fence on the other side. He sloshed across it to the wire. He could find a new staff, even hide in the brush and be warm.

But the tangle of under-

growth would have been impenetrable even with two good legs. And nothing in reach could be a staff or even a cane. He was stuck here. He couldn't go any farther.

Game over. No time-outs.

He sat. He sat against a fencepost, his back resting on cedar between strands of barbed wire. He sat and waited.

Then he heard the car and he knew it was Buck.

He lay down beside the fence and looked over the low grass and down the road.

Buck was flying.

Bert lowered his head and smiled. Buck would never see him. Buck would flash by, and Bert would know which way to watch for him next time. He'd wait.

Like under the bridge. Like always.

No.

No waiting. No hiding. If he waited, he'd be dodging headlights all night, sleeping by the side of the road. This wasn't the time to wait. Almost time, but not quite.

That's what Buck never understood, that sometimes just standing wasn't passive. And Bert realized that he himself had never understood that, sometimes winning was all that mattered.

He got to his knees.

Buck was closing fast.

Bert pushed himself all the way up and started hobbling toward the road. His leg gave way again, and he dropped to his knees.

Buck hadn't seen him. Maybe he thought he was dead and wasn't looking. Maybe the starburst in the windshield was splintering his vision. From his knees Bert started yelling and waving his arms. Buck was almost even with him. Bert threw the long half of his staff. It smacked the hood of the car and shattered.

Buck hit the brakes and the tires screeched and by the time he got the car stopped and turned around, Bert was limping toward the highway. Buck stood up above the windshield, staring.

"Come get me, you bastard," Bert yelled. "Roadkill poker."

Buck dropped into the driver's seat.

You'd better buckle up, Bert said to himself, and started back across the access road. He heard Buck revving the engine. Good.

Buck launched himself with a squeal of tires laying rubber.

Bert crossed a third of the ditch and stopped. He turned and faced the car bearing down on him. He knew what Buck saw was Bert standing off the road in a big puddle, and hoped that what Buck didn't see, didn't realize was there, was the ditch, the

dropoff under water, the culvert just below the black surface.

"Come on, you simple son of a bitch," he yelled. He raised his right hand straight into the air, middle finger extended.

Buck roared down, angling toward him *wait for it* the universe contracting to the car, the engine shrieking *wait for it* the hood expanding to fill everything he could see, headed right for him *wait for it*.

He waited, screaming at Buck.

At the last second he kicked backwards as hard as he could with his good leg so that he was already falling away as the Mustang blasted into the water, pitching driver's side down into the ditch and crashing into the access road and culvert, sending a wall of water and sand smashing into him as he dropped toward the ditch on the other side of the access road. He took in a throatful of ditch water before he could get his legs under him and his head into the air. He spewed and coughed and clawed his way to shore and made his way back to the wreck.

The Mustang was crushed into the culvert, half submerged. A new starburst whitened the

windshield and Buck lay face-down in the water around the steering wheel.

"You felt that, I betcha," Bert said.

He eased into the ditch and waded to the car. He reached in, pushing Buck's head aside to get to the ignition. He found the keys and pulled them free. He wanted to get his clothes out of the trunk before the car slipped all the way into the ditch.

As he pulled his arm back, Buck's head bobbed a little in the water, maybe only from his arm brushing past it. Bert waited a moment to be sure. Soon everything was still.

He got his duffel out of the trunk and changed into dry clothes as the sun lingered somewhere beyond the trees. He found his flashlight, but the bulb was broken. He sat down on his duffel by the road, wrapped in his Welcome to Miami beach blanket with a smiling yellow sun wearing Ray-Bans, shivering as he waited for help. By the time he saw headlights pricking the far end of darkness he was finally feeling warm, but a cold place in his stomach told him that Buck was going to be with him for a long, long time.

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Grownups Are All Alike Eve Fisher

When I was a kid, you didn't go to summer camp because that was what grandparents were for. They would feed you better, make sure you were bathed and clothed and worked hard in the garden, and, most important of all, keep you for two whole months for free. It was a whale of a deal. My mother sent me off every summer, which was probably good for both our mental healths.

My grandparents lived in Laskin, South Dakota, population twen-

ty-five hundred and a major urban center in that part of the state. They used to live on the farm, but Granddad's heart got bad so they got someone else to farm it on shares and moved into a big old house that Grandpa's grandfather had built when *he* got too sick to farm any more and moved to town. When *he* died, *he'd* passed the place on to Grandpa's father, who lived there until *he* died, and plans were to continue the tradition. You might say it was the Thompson Family Retirement Home, except everybody still worked hard and there weren't any nurses hanging around.

Their house came with a lot big enough to grow a good-sized garden and a few fruit trees. The far end of it sloped down to the creek, which could get pretty high when it rained and then dry out to dust in no time flat. Grandma always warned me not to play down there, but it was hard to resist, especially since Granddad took me fishing there on cool mornings. In the afternoon he slept, and I made the rounds.

Laskin, or so it seemed to me at the time, was made up almost entirely of old people living in old houses full of old treasures, telling old stories about old times. At least our neighborhood was. Which was fine with me. I thought they were pretty interesting, one way or another, which was good, since my afternoon rounds were not voluntary. Grandma parceled me out shamelessly to run errands and do odd jobs. She called this being helpful and neighborly. Looking back, I can see it was a great way of getting me out of her hair for a few hours so that Granddad—and maybe even Grandma—could take a nap in peace. So I shopped for Miss Fan and Miss Icey, weeded Mrs. Winfred's garden, read to Mrs. Wright, dusted Mrs. Oldham's china closet, and in general was run ragged by half the town. There were times I thought of rebelling, but Grandma would have killed me and, besides, I always got paid, either in cash or in kind, so I kept at it.

The summer I was eleven was the summer everything got strange. The night before I arrived, a nurse up at the Laskin hospital, Mary Carter, finished her evening shift, walked out to her car, and vanished. It was on the Sioux Falls news and everything. The police said they were doing everything they could. They showed a fuzzy photograph of her while the newscaster asked us all to call in if we had any information as to her whereabouts. Granddad looked at the photograph and shook his head.

"Poor girl," he said.



"Girl!" Grandma was indignant. "She's in her forties if she's a day. I don't know where they got that photograph."

"Do you think she was really kidnapped?" I asked breathlessly. This was about the most exciting thing that had ever happened in Laskin, at least in my memory.

"Oh, I doubt it," Grandma said sternly. "It's probably just the Change. Some women get like that in their forties. Almost as bad as men. Anything to get attention. She doesn't have a husband to run off from, so she runs off from her job. But enough about that. Let's take our iced tea out on the porch."

All the next day I wondered what it would be like to just get in a car and go away, anywhere, somewhere, just vanish. Being too young to worry much about money, I thought it sounded romantic in the extreme. I half promised myself that when I grew up I'd do it, too. At least once.

Two days later they found Mary Carter's car behind a brush pile at Hutchinson's Gravel. There was no sign of her, although rumor had it there were bloodstains on the front seat. Grandma retracted her menopause theory and started talking about homicidal maniacs. She also started keeping an eye on me, which put a real crimp in my day. No more wandering down to the creek at all, even with Granddad.

"But we just want to go fishing!" I wailed.

"Do you want your grandfather to have a heart attack while some homicidal maniac attacks you?" Well, no, I didn't. "Then you'll just stay away from there." I had to agree, even though I couldn't really see why a homicidal maniac, if one existed, would kidnap nurses by night and then come clear over to the other side of town just to spend the day lurking down by the creek.

But time passed without any trace of Mary Carter. A week, then two weeks, and she wasn't on the news any more, and out of sight, out of mind, right? Grandma relaxed and I made the rounds again and Granddad and I went fishing again, and then, out of nowhere, came horrible news. A thirteen-year-old girl from one of the Hutterite colonies disappeared. The police got on it right away, with search parties swarming out from the colony, around Lake Howard, through Laskin, and down to the gravel road on the edge of Herv Ullman's farm, six miles outside of town, where her body was found the next day.

The adults were all pretty grim-faced. They were also pretty tight-lipped around me. Laskin still lived in the 1950's or perhaps

even the 1930's, when young girls were supposed to be innocent and ignorant and should be kept innocent and ignorant as long as possible. So they whispered about it to one another, and I picked up what I could: words like "assaulted" and "strangled" and "raped." I knew what they meant. It was the whispering of them that made them so frightening.

Of course, most people now assumed that Mary Carter had also been killed, though some said we shouldn't give up hope. But that poor Hutterite child haunted everyone. It threw a sinister light on any disappearance, and there was another one. Around the same time as Mary Carter's disappearance, a fifteen-year-old from Herman named Jane Seaton had disappeared. At the time everybody thought she'd simply run away from home. She was "wild," had been causing a lot of trouble at school and at home, and had last been seen talking to a young punk in the Pamida parking lot here in Laskin. But now a whole lot of people, including her parents, whose attitude had practically been "good riddance," were frantic and desperate to find her alive.

My grandmother put all of this together and panicked for probably the only time in her life. She called my mother and suggested I'd be better off back home. My mother told her of the two gang-related shootings and four robberies in our neighborhood, not to mention the serial rapist who'd been stalking the local college campus for about a year, and summed it all up by saying I was still safer where I was. This didn't do a thing to comfort Grandma, but it did ensure that she kept me in Laskin, in a condition that was very close to lock-and-key. No creek. No rounds. No errands. No leaving the house without her or Granddad right alongside me.

"But what about Miss Fan and Miss Icey?" I wailed, suddenly wild to work for others. Wisely I picked the two Grandma knew were my favorites. "Who'll take care of them?"

"Matt Jensen will run any errands they want, the same as he does when you're not here," Grandma said, wounding me with her intimation that I was not indispensable. "You are not going out of this yard." And she made it plain that if any strange cars or people were in the neighborhood, I wasn't to go out of the house. It was like being in prison. And it was no comfort to know that every other child in Laskin was in the same boat.

So it was actually a relief when the Wrights, our next-door neighbors, finally came back from Minneapolis where Mrs. Wright had undergone some sort of medical treatment. I never did know what

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was wrong with her, but she had been bedridden ever since I could remember. When I saw Mr. Wright lift her out of the car to carry her into the house, I could tell she still was. Her treatments were endless, expensive, and ineffectual. "More prayer, less medicine," was Grandma's prescription, but she kept it to herself and invited Mr. Wright over once he got Mrs. Wright settled in.

Usually Mrs. Wright's health was a topic of all-absorbing interest to Grandma, but this time she made the briefest inquiries possible and then plunged into a recitation of recent events. The poor man was completely shocked, especially about Mary Carter.

"Why, she nursed Emma the last time she was in the hospital down here," Mr. Wright wailed.

"I thought she might have," Grandma said triumphantly. "What was she like?"

"She . . . well, she was very nice."

Grandma rolled her eyes at the absolute incapability of men to remember anything of importance about future crime victims. "I mean, what was she *like*? Was she one of those flirty kind of nurses, or was she serious or cold or professional or what?" Grandma asked.

"Oh, she was very professional," Mr. Wright said. "Very good. Emma said she was the only nurse who could hit her veins the first time and not turn her into a dartboard. I can't believe—well, we'll just have to hope that she comes back unharmed."

"It puzzles me," Grandma said. "I can understand some pervert chasing after a young girl like that poor Hutterite child, but they don't usually go after middle-aged women."

"The Boston Strangler," was Granddad's contribution.

"He assaulted *old* women," Grandma retorted.

"It's just all so unbelievable," Mr. Wright said. "Emma will be terribly upset."

I saw my chance. "I'll come read to her tomorrow and take her mind off it," I said brightly.

Now, to appreciate the full irony of this you have to realize that when I found out at the beginning of the summer that the Wrights were out of town it had been a major relief. Mrs. Wright was, as I say, bedridden, and the most interesting thing about her was that her bed was right in the living room, which I thought was kind of neat because she never had to worry about getting up or dressing or anything like that. There she was, and that was that.

But other than that, she was so dull. She found reading in bed uncomfortable, so every Tuesday and Thursday I'd go over and read

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aloud to her for an hour. She got, for reasons passing understanding, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Sunday New York Times*, neither of which had comics or anything else of interest to me. Sometimes I thought I'd die of boredom, working my way through those long, dry, dusty articles about business and finance and politics. Mr. Wright sat in on these sessions fairly often, and something in his face told me he was dying for *Peanuts* or *Ann Landers* as much as I was.

But Grandma had kept me on such a tight leash that suddenly reading to Mrs. Wright, complete with Lawrence Welk playing in the background, seemed like a real treat. Grandma, fully realizing that this was a remarkable change in attitude, gave me a sharp glance which I avoided for fear of deflation.

"We'll see," Grandma said discouragingly. To Mr. Wright she said, "You'll let us know when Emma feels up to it, and then we'll see about sending this ball of fire over."

"I appreciate your even thinking of letting Linda come over. I know I'd be afraid to let her out of my sight with all this going on," Mr. Wright said.

"Well now, we know you'd take as good care of her as if she were your own," Granddad said.

"I would," Mr. Wright promised. Suddenly his voice sounded fearful. "Why, I'd never forgive myself if anything happened. And with Emma so weak, maybe we'd better not—"

I sighed and got up off the porch swing.

"And where do you think you're going?" Grandma asked.

"I just want to get something to drink," I said. Grandma nodded, and I went into the kitchen and wondered if I'd ever be free again.

It didn't look likely. The next day word came that Mary Carter's body had been found floating in the marsh at the north end of Lake Howard, near the golf course. And there was something horrible about it, worse even than her being murdered. I could tell by everyone's expression as they whispered to one another, though all I could hear were scattered words like "battered in" and "closed casket." This was right after the funeral, which had been extremely well attended. We didn't go. Instead I had a nightmare in which Mary Carter rose up from the lake, dripping and faceless, and my screams woke up the whole house. Grandma made me some hot milk, while Granddad put his arm around me and put a shot of whisky in it, and the next day no one said anything about it.

No one was saying much of anything. That was the quietest sum-

mer I can remember. It was killing hot, too. The news said we were breaking heat records all over the place, which seemed more of an achievement at ten at night than it did at one in the afternoon. After lunch, hot and sweaty from eating and washing dishes, I'd go out on the front porch and watch absolutely nothing go by all afternoon. Sometimes, around three in the afternoon, with nothing moving and nobody out and all the windows and doors up and down the block shut tight and not a sound out of anything, it seemed like I was the only person left alive. I'd run indoors and stand outside my grandparents' bedroom and be so glad to hear Granddad snore it makes me blush to think about it.

The Wrights' return hadn't helped me a bit. What with the heat wearing on her body and the unsolved crimes wearing on her nerves, Mrs. Wright was doing worse than usual.

"She's just not eating," Mr. Wright said to us one day on the porch. "And she's not sleeping, either. I swear, if she doesn't get better soon, I'm going to take her back to Minneapolis, and if they can't do anything for her, then I'm going to take her right on over to Rochester and hang the expense." Mr. Wright and Grandma both shook their heads. "But," he continued in a cheerier voice, "Emma wanted me to tell you how much she appreciated that beef jelly you brought over. She's sorry she was napping. She said it was ridiculous that here, when she can't sleep hardly at all, she was caught resting during the day. But I swear to you that's the only sleep she gets any more."

"Now, you tell Emma not to worry, I'm glad she's getting some rest. She looked so thin and pale as she was lying there sleeping. I wouldn't have had the heart to wake her up. But you make sure she eats all that beef jelly because there's nothing more strengthening in the world for an invalid." It was a good thing I was sitting on the far wall of the porch reading, so Grandma couldn't see the face I made. I'd had some of that jelly once and hadn't been sick in Laskin since. "I just wish I could do more for her, but what with all that's been going on around here—" She shook her head. "It's no wonder Emma's doing poorly. She's not alone. None of us is sleeping right. Poor little Linda's taken to creeping into bed with us at night, hot as it is, and—"

I didn't hear the rest because I was so embarrassed and so angry the blood was pounding in my ears. The real trouble with grandparents is that you can't slap them. Or tell them to shut up. And Mr. Wright was just as bad. When he left, he told me not to be afraid,

the Bogeyman wasn't going to get me. I looked at him and raged at how grownups think grey hair gives them the right to treat everybody else like a little kid who doesn't have any feelings worth bothering about. But I knew that if I let my anger show Grandma would punish me by never letting me go over. So I smiled and said goodbye politely.

That Friday, Granddad had to go to the doctor for his checkup. Grandma always went with him, and when I say went with him, I mean she went into the examination room with him because if she didn't there were a whole lot of things that Granddad would never tell the doctor, and then what would be the use of the visit? And if she did that, and she fully intended to, then what would become of me? I couldn't go into the examination room, and I certainly couldn't be left to sit alone in the waiting room, and I definitely couldn't be left alone in the house.

So Grandma got Miss Fan and Miss Ikey to babysit me. This was humiliating in theory but enjoyable in practice because two more lovable old spinsters never lived, even if the murders had made them nervous wrecks. The responsibility for my safety had them strung up like barbed wire, to the point that when Hickey, our mailman of twenty years, came to the door, they jumped up and snatched me away behind them as if Ted Bundy had come to call before they recognized him and gave a sigh of relief. After that they calmed down and told me old stories until they finally relaxed into their afternoon nap.

I told my grandparents about Miss Fan and Miss Ikey's taking fright at Hickey at supper. They didn't find it as funny as I did.

"This whole town's going to have a nervous breakdown soon," Granddad said, buttering his bread.

"Well, at least they've arrested somebody," Grandma said, which was news to me.

"Who?" I asked. "When? Did he do it?"

Grandma looked at me severely, but Granddad said, "She'll hear soon enough. They arrested Vedder Haines this morning," he said. I simply stared at him. Vedder was a half-wit who'd been living down by the bait shop at Lake Howard for years. Everybody knew he was completely harmless and scared to death of people. "I just hope it was more for his protection than any serious suspicion."

"What do you mean by that?" Grandma asked.

Granddad chewed down a big bite of bread, swallowed, and said, "Oh, come on now, Nell. Vedder? Besides, he's never been anywhere

near the colony. And no half-wit kidnapped Mary Carter and did what he did to her."

"What did he do, Granddad?" I asked.

"Why, he took her—" He stopped, looked at me, and said, "This is no subject for the table."

"Well, could we go out on the porch and you tell me there?" I pleaded.

My grandparents exchanged looks. "And it's no subject at all for young girls," he said. "It'd just give you nightmares."

"I'm already having nightmares," I said, which was the God's own truth.

"So is everybody else," Grandma said. "And will have till this whole thing is cleared up. But we don't need to discuss it all the time."

Which is exactly what everybody did until I showed up, I thought, but I kept my mouth shut.

We all needed some good news, and the next day it came. Jane Seaton had been found. Alive. She hadn't been kidnapped at all. She had run off with the punk from the Pamida parking lot and gone to Rapid City, where a policeman had spotted her under circumstances that no one ever described to me.

"Well, where is she now?" Grandma asked of Hickey, who brought the news along with the mail.

"Oh, they've got her in the juvenile facility in Rapid City. They'll probably ship her back on Monday."

"Spitting all the way," Grandma said sourly. "She'll just run off again once she gets home. Well, at least she's alive."

I saw Mr. Wright coming up from his garden with a load of tomatoes. "Grandma," I asked, "can I go tell Mr. Wright? Please?"

Grandma looked at me. "Oh, all right. Run along. But don't go anywhere else!" I dashed away as she asked Hickey, "And what about that boy she ran off with?"

"Mr. Wright! Mr. Wright!" I cried as I neared him.

"Why, Linda," he said, setting the tomatoes down on the back steps. "What is it? Is everything all right?"

"It's wonderful!" I said, although why I thought it was so wonderful is beyond me. "They found Jane Seaton, and she's alive and well and she never was kidnapped but ran off, just like everybody thought at first, and she went all the way to Rapid City and—"

"Hold on, hold on," Mr. Wright said. "Slow down a bit. I can't make heads nor tails out of it with you going that fast." I took a

deep breath, remembering that old people are slow, and explained it all to him again. He nodded his head. "Well, that's the best news I've heard in a long time." He smiled at me. "Would you like to come in and tell Emma?"

"Oh yes!" I said.

Mr. Wright stepped around the side of the house and called out to Grandma, "Mrs. Thompson, I'm going to take Linda inside and let her tell Emma the good news. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course," Grandma called back. "I hope it'll cheer her up!" Then she went back to her conversation with Hickey, and we went inside.

Inside was just as I remembered it. I knew the Wrights' house, as I knew most of our neighbors' houses, by heart. Mr. Wright set the tomatoes in the kitchen and called out, "Emma! Linda Thompson's come to see us!" A faint voice called back, but I couldn't catch what it said.

We walked into the living room. Mrs. Wright was lying in her bed, thin and pale, just as Grandma had said. Her face was all hollow, like pain was eating her alive, and for a moment I felt frightened. The people of our neighborhood, the ones I did my rounds for, were all old and frail, but it had always been inconceivable to me that any of them could die. Suddenly I wasn't so sure.

"Hello, Linda," Mrs. Wright said. Her voice sounded strangely far away.

"Hello, Mrs. Wright," I said.

"Linda's got some good news," Mr. Wright said. "Tell her, Linda."

"Jane Seaton's been found alive," I began and told the tale in words very nearly of one syllable. Her face looked so skull-like that I was nervous and made a poor job of it.

But when I was done, she smiled at me, very sweetly, and said, very faintly, "Thank you. That is good news."

"Yes, it is," Mr. Wright said stoutly. She closed her eyes, and he turned to me and said, "I think she's tired, honey. We need to let her get some rest."

I nodded. "Goodbye, Mrs. Wright," I said.

"Goodbye, Linda," she said.

When I got back home, Grandma asked me how Mrs. Wright took the news, and I told her she'd said it was good news, though she looked awfully ill. Grandma said she wasn't well at all and hoped God would forgive her for all the times she'd thought Emma was malingering, but it was time for dinner.

All through the meal, Grandma and Granddad discussed the re-

cover of Jane Seaton. Both agreed that it was definitely a mixed blessing, and both felt sorry for the boy she'd run off with, who was in jail for some reason or other. It had something to do with Jane's being a minor, but I didn't understand what statutory meant and how it could be kidnapping or rape if she'd gone off with him willingly. But then Grandma didn't either, so I didn't feel as stupid as usual.

We were eating lemon pie when there came a lull in the conversation, and I asked, "Grandma, when did Mr. Wright get remarried?"

They both looked at me like I was crazy.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Grandma asked.

"I mean, when did he marry this Mrs. Wright?" I asked, but a little more hesitantly. "I mean, she's not the same woman that he was married to last summer." Both of them were just staring at me. "Her face is different. She's got cheekbones."

"What in the world! Everybody's got cheekbones. I swear the child has lost her mind," Grandma said to the air.

"Yes, but she always used to be flat-faced. You said so yourself. Now they're really high, you know, like an Indian's, only she's pale. . . ." I was starting to feel a little crazy, but I persevered. "Didn't you notice when you were over?"

Granddad looked at Grandma with an expression that made her look around the room and then say, "She was asleep. I—" She looked at Granddad and said, "It can't be. She's been ill, she's lost a lot of weight. That'll make anyone's cheekbones stand out. Why are you looking at me like that?"

Granddad got up and walked out of the dining room. Grandma stared after him, wide-eyed, and then got up and followed him to the pantry, where he picked up a jar of Grandma's best preserves.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said. "I haven't seen Emma since they got home, and I think it's about time I did, seeing as she's so ill." He looked at us both and said, "I'm just going to see how she's doing."

We stood at the back door and watched him go over to the Wrights' house, Grandma rocking back and forth, saying, "This is crazy," the whole time he was gone. He wasn't gone long. He came out of their house empty-handed, with a smile on his face, which dropped right off the minute he set foot inside of ours.

"Well?" Grandma asked. "Did you see her?" He ignored her and went to the phone. "Who are you calling?" she asked.

"The police," he said. And Grandma slid down into a kitchen chair as if she'd been shot.



It was a good thing Granddad was known as one of the most honest and soberest men alive, or the police would never have listened to him, much less come over and discovered Mary Carter alive and well and lying in Mrs. Wright's bed, with a whole lot of makeup on to make her look ailing and old. She tried denying everything, but Mr. Wright just collapsed on the spot. He could kill his wife and mutilate her body to make everyone think it was Mary Carter's, he could kill a poor Hutterite child who witnessed the disposal of Emma Wright, and worse yet (to Grandma's way of thinking) assault her so that it would look like a sex crime, but he couldn't look two policemen he'd known all his life in the eye and bluff it out.

"Even so, he damn near got away with it," Granddad growled. "They were leaving Wednesday. To take 'poor Emma' back to Minneapolis. We'd never have seen either one of them again." He looked at me and smiled. "It's a good thing I listened to Linda."

Grandma shuddered at the thought of how close they'd come to thwarting justice. "But why on earth did he let you in to see her?" she wondered.

"Oh, she was asleep. Her back to me," Granddad said.

"Then how could you tell?"

"At first I couldn't," Granddad admitted. "But I've seen Emma Wright in bed more than any other woman on earth, excepting you, Nell." He grinned at Grandma, and said, "Purely platonically, of course," and Grandma slapped him. They can be so childish. "Anyway, there I was, looking down at her, as always, and it suddenly dawned on me that last year Emma was shorter. So I figured Linda was right."

"God save us," Grandma sighed. "But then why on earth did he let Linda go over and see her awake?" she asked.

"Well, someone had to see Emma alive and awake and ill before they left," Granddad replied. "I think he figured Linda would be the safest because she hadn't seen Emma for a year and wouldn't have her face as clear in her mind."

"No," I disagreed boldly. "He thought that to a kid like me one old woman would look just like another."

Grandma looked at me with disappointment in her eyes. "Linda, they were both only in their forties."

Which, looking back on it, was the most disturbing thing of all.

KILL IN HASTE

Stephen
Wasylyk



I'd last seen Sharon Cramer at her wedding five years ago. Now the radiant and beautiful image I'd carried with me from that day was gone; the long, dark, wavy hair obviously neglected, the thin, patrician

face slightly bloated, the once-creamy complexion a bit muddy. The warmth in the brown eyes was all that remained, and even that had a tendency to fade into dullness as she talked.

Of the many ways to acceler-

ate the damage that time wreaks upon people, excessive use of alcohol ranks near the top. Yet until she'd married Nelson, she seldom touched a drink. Shows what keeping bad company can do. His first words had probably been, "What do you have to drink, Mom?"

I'd heard the liquid lifestyle had caught up with her sooner than with him—some people being more susceptible than others—but that AA had helped.

Until Nelson was murdered.

Enough to drive a teetotaler to the bottle. Deadly for a woman already having difficulty keeping away from one.

I wondered why she'd wanted to have lunch. If she was looking for sympathy beyond the loss of her husband, she knew she wouldn't get it from me. I'd always been short on compassion for self-inflicted problems, reserving it for people forced to bear burdens through no fault of their own.

She lifted her coffee cup with both hands. Didn't want me to notice the trembling if she tried it one-handed.

"Something is wrong," she said. "It didn't happen the way they say. Don't ask me how I know. I just do. Nelson and I—we knew what the other was thinking. You've never felt that close to anyone, have you?"

"No."

"No. Always cool, always detached. I guess that's what makes you so good at what you do."

She lowered the cup without drinking. "Whatever he felt in that last split second, I'd have felt, too. The boy didn't kill him, J. K. Ironical, isn't it—the grieving widow defending the man they arrested for murdering her husband on nothing more than a feeling. Am I crazy?"

"Very probably."

She smiled crookedly. "Good old J. K. If you don't want the truth, don't ask. That's why I want you to look into it. You tell me I'm wrong, and I'll believe it. The trouble is, J. K., I'm broke. Since they let him go, Nelson had been working that ten to six shift as night manager in the convenience store, and I was punching computer keys wherever the temp service sent me during the day. We were in debt to the eyeballs. Do private detectives do pro bono work like lawyers, J. K.?"

"Not this one, but that isn't important. Neither is knowing who killed him because that won't change anything or solve any of your problems. Nelson is dead. That's all that counts. You're down to bedrock. Survival. Anything else is a luxury you can't afford. You don't need a detective. You need help."

I finished my coffee and pushed my cup aside.

"I'll give you twenty-four hours, a day of my time. Need a good lawyer? I'll give you one who *will* do pro bono work. Need a good job? I'll make a few phone calls because you're one of the most capable people who ever worked for me. But you show up on time and sober. Three months, six months, a year, you're back on your feet and this is far behind you."

She gave me that crooked smile again. "My brain isn't pickled yet, J. K. I know all that. You haven't identified the problem, which is very simple. I'll always feel Nelson wanted me to do something and I let him down. Let's make a deal. I'll do everything you say if you do what I ask."

I'd been out-maneuvered and hung out to dry. Drunk, half-drunk, or sober, she was a better tactician than a NATO general, but what the hell, if it kept her away from the bottle, I was willing to try.

I raised both hands, palms out. "All right, but if the kid who was arrested didn't do it, who did?"

She shrugged. "You're the detective."

We parted outside the restaurant. She walked away in the gray summer rain, head lowered, shoulders sagging. It had

taken Nelson only five years to destroy the proud, bright woman I'd known.

A cold drop trickled down my neck. Seemed appropriate.

Investigations for a few attorneys, both criminal and civil, kept me small but kept me busy. On the fringes of a profession where shading the truth was considered part of the game, I'd always thought my greatest accomplishment was that no one doubted my integrity. No one acquires friends by speaking the truth, but you do acquire a respect that can often be cashed in like friendship.

By the end of the next day I'd provided her with a new attorney. Perhaps feeling his fees might never be paid, the one she'd inherited from Nelson had been dilatory, so she had no idea where she stood. Nelson, like many others who live for today and to hell with tomorrow, had left a mess, and what she knew about their financial affairs wouldn't fill a brandy glass. Like too many otherwise intelligent spouses, she'd gone along thinking she'd catch up with it all one day, as though she'd receive a warning from On High that the time had come.

I also set up two job interviews, stipulating to both that if she showed up late or bleary-

eyed I'd consider it a favor if they pointed to the door.

Her history I knew. No different from that of millions of others. Worked for me for three years before leaving for more money than I could pay. Sifted through the usual quota of men before she married Nelson. Parents dead, an aunt here, an uncle there, some cousins scattered about, but for anything of consequence she was alone.

Other than shaking his hand at the wedding, I'd never met Nelson. I knew nothing about him except that he was estranged from a family with a little money, appeared to be a nice guy, was considered a hunk by the women, and thought he was smarter than he was, a fault common to many.

He'd been in what could be called upper middle management at a paper company, responsible for keeping track of the production of rolls of toilet paper, napkins, towels, or some such, until the corporation discovered that one person at a computer could do the job of his entire section. Demand being nonexistent for overpaid executives experienced in counting toilet paper rolls, he'd become night manager in a convenience store while Sharon became a temp to help preserve their lifestyle, alcohol and all.

She could fill in no blanks.

She'd met his family once and never again. They didn't like her and thought he'd married beneath him. Didn't matter, she said. All that mattered was that they loved each other, a blind emotion that has accounted for more stupid behavior than can be measured. I could only wish she'd been a bit more curious. If her husband hadn't been killed by the man in custody, someone from his past or present might well have done it.

I turned over a sheet of his vital and not-so-vital statistics to Arlo Vanisci. Arlo had built a tidy business poking his computer's nose into people's personal histories. Since none of us is perfect, my integrity didn't extend to asking him how. He might not find out much more about Nelson than I already knew, but every little bit helped.

Having set a couple of wheels rolling, I went to see Sil Feliciano, the attorney for the man arrested for killing Nelson. At this point he'd know everything the police did, and getting information from him would be a great deal easier. The prosecution, after all, had no reason whatsoever to talk to someone who might make them look bad.

He was young, smooth-faced, with a bushy military mustache he evidently hoped made him look older but only made him look ridiculous. Court-assigned,

exactly the type of inexperienced defender that prosecutors dote on so they can beef up their conviction rate.

I told him I'd been asked to look into Nelson's murder. "If you give me a dollar, I'll be working for you and all the confidentiality rules come into play. You can tell me what you know, and I'll tell you what I find out."

He grinned and handed over a one. "How can I turn you down? That's a better deal than buying a lottery ticket."

He leaned back in his chair and began reciting.

The night Nelson was killed, a twenty-one-year-old named Larson walked up to the counter with a six-pack of beer, not knowing he was zigzagging under the eyes of an expert. Nelson returned the beer to the refrigerator, telling him he wasn't about to sell it to someone already so drunk he'd be lucky to make it across the parking lot.

Two witnesses—another customer and a college student restocking the shelves—described the drunken tantrum Larson threw, kicking over displays while swearing to come back and kill Nelson, before staggering out.

"Nelson didn't call the cops?"

"Evidently one imbibor never blows the whistle on another," he said. "Drinkers' code or something."

Nelson left at the end of his shift.

Employees parked their cars at the far end of the lot, some sixty feet from the door, so even if someone had been looking, he wouldn't have seen much, since it was still dark at six in the morning. They did hear the shot, ran out, and found Nelson lying alongside his car, his keys in his hand and a bullet in his heart.

All they could contribute was that they'd seen a dark car burning rubber as it took off.

"All cars today look like upside-down bathtubs with headlights," Feliciano said. "They could describe Larson, though, particularly the jungle fatigues and combat boots. The cops put two and two together. You know the Eagleville range?"

I nodded. "Shot there a few times."

"There was a pin match going on that weekend. Never heard of one until Larson told me about it. They set up bowling pins on a table. Your choice of handgun. Shooting against the clock, you try to knock the pins off. Fastest time wins a few dollars. The fatigues and combat boots made the cops look out there. Just what effect your clothes have on your marksmanship escapes me, but there was Larson, using an automatic with powered-up .380 ammo, which happens to be the type of slug they recovered from

Nelson. Too distorted to match to his gun but damaging, particularly since he can't explain where he was when Nelson was killed and neither can any of his friends. His car also happens to be a dark color, and the witnesses picked him out of a lineup without hesitation. All circumstantial, but men have been convicted on less, particularly men with his nasty attitude. If anyone had told me they liked him, I'd suspect a bribe."

"No shell casing? If he used an automatic—"

"The police think he fired from inside his car."

I chuckled. "You can chop that theory up. If his hand was outside, the ejected shell would have been on the ground. If his hand was inside, his ears would ring for three days, and they'd have found powder residue in the car. Didn't disclose any forensic evidence like that, did they? They probably also said they didn't find the casing in the car because he'd removed it, as though a drunk would be that alert. And I don't care how many bowling pins he hits from twenty-five feet in broad daylight, hitting a man in the heart in the dark is something else."

"Useful speculation, but I'll need more than that."

"Have your secretary do a little research. You'll find that competition shooting is based on

testing your nerves and skill against another's. A noisier hobby than golf, but still an individual competitive challenge: One little twitch at the wrong time and you've had a pleasant outing in the sun. A competition shooter would no more shoot anything live than a golfer would crown someone with a five-iron. Many won't even hunt. Talk to Larson. You'll find he'd rather win a few dollars knocking pins off a table than hit a big jackpot in Atlantic City. Anyone can win a jackpot, but it takes nerve and skill to beat the field by a tenth of a second. No glory in shooting someone."

"That's supposed to prove he couldn't have done it?"

"No, but you can tell the jury that the odds are against it, and let them decide if he's an aberration."

"Wonderful. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, a man who likes to shoot bowling pins couldn't possibly have committed this crime—c'mon, J. K., I'm no silver-tongued orator. Get me something so clear and simple my five-year-old son can understand it. Or return my dollar."

"Sorry," I said. "No refunds."

A message from Sharon said she'd taken one of the jobs. That took care of her days. She'd have to find a way to get through the nights on her own.

Another asked me to call Danny Cadogan, the lawyer I'd asked to look into Nelson's estate. Small practice, drove a battered Park Avenue, but when it came to estates, trusts, and other financial morasses people get themselves into, the three-piece suits who drove Porsches bowed from the waist at the mention of his name.

"She brought me a box of file folders," he said. "I turned them over to a paralegal to straighten out. Nelson's will is valid. Unfortunately, his estate consists of a big mortgage and a great many unpaid bills. I'm sorry to say that under other circumstances you would have owed the paralegal and her boyfriend a dinner at the best place in town because she unearthed a fifteen-year-old letter that he'd just tucked away as though it meant nothing and probably never mentioned to his wife. Sitting down, J. K.?"

"No, but it takes a lot to knock me off my feet."

"Well, if this does nothing else, it will stagger you. The letter is from his grandfather's attorneys advising him that the old man had established a trust fund for both him and his sister which neither could touch until the end of this year, at which time they would split it down the middle. If either died in the meantime, the other inherited it all immediately. Now, he was

twenty-two at the time. That's a very stupid age. I know because that was when I decided to become a lawyer. I can guess how he felt. He considered the sum modest and he couldn't touch it, so he buried the letter. I called the attorneys to confirm it and to see what it's worth today. The administrator of the fund is either very smart or the best gambler in the world. That trust is now worth a half million, half of which would have solved a lot of our client's problems. Too bad she won't get it."

"It all goes to the sister?"

"Ah. We have what's known as supreme irony here. Nelson was shot on Saturday morning. Uterine cancer killed his sister on Monday. The moment he died, it became hers, and when she died, it became her husband's. If Nelson had been shot three days later, Sharon would have inherited it all."

"Life is full of ifs. If he'd gone on counting toilet paper rolls, he'd have died of cirrhosis of the liver. Don't mention this to Sharon. She won't just fall off the wagon. She'll jump, and I wouldn't blame her. Give me the sister's name and address."

"Going to send congratulations to the widower?"

"Doesn't sound as if he needs condolences, does it?"

Feliciano had given me a copy of the prosecution's sketch of

the crime scene. The location of Nelson's car was marked, his body indicated by a stick figure. No idea of what I'd be looking for, but I might as well go there.

The phone rang. Arlo Vanisci.

"When did this guy lose his job, J. K.?"

"Six months ago, I think."

"Okay. That explains how he could have credit cards at two addresses. Easy to do if you have a good job."

"Two addresses?"

"Two addresses. At one, the cards are issued to Nelson and Sharon. At the other, to Nelson only. I thought at first I was dealing with two men with the same name. The credit card companies still do. Takes time to catch up with you if you send in enough money now and then to keep them off your back. No additional worry for the widow, though. I think she's responsible only for the cards issued to them both. I'll keep looking, but I've seen enough so far to tell you the man doesn't appear to have been an honorable gentleman."

"Exactly my impression when I shook his hand at his wedding. I'll trade you the name of his brother-in-law for that second address."

Now I had three stops to make—the scene, the home of the sister, and Nelson's second address. Second addresses usually fall into the vacation home cat-

egory. I didn't think that one only three miles from your primary residence qualified.

Recognition being essential, franchised businesses use standardized building plans, this one duplicated throughout the country hundreds of times. Located on a corner; entrances from each street. Islands with waist-high shrubs screened the lot from passing drivers. At night, floodlights would be concentrated at the front of the building, the far reaches of the lot in shadow. Since they were open around the clock, holdups weren't that rare, but Nelson had brought them the distinction of a body in the parking lot.

The slot where he'd been parked was unoccupied, as well as the spaces on either side. Now in its third day, the rain had given the macadam a thorough washing. I wondered what I'd expected to find.

Fan-shaped streams slid toward a grated drain where water tinkled and gurgled on its return to the sea. A candy wrapper trapped in a small whirlpool in a low spot alongside the drain spun lazily. Something bright winked at me from below the rain-dimpled surface as the wrapper rotated, beckoning like a woman's glances.

I reached.

A gold earring. Wire circle; broad crescent at the bottom holding a small blue stone. Screw type, for unpierced ears.

When I handed it to a slim, attractive woman with graying hair behind the counter, she studied it, looked up, smiled, and said, "I know your type. Give a lady one earring and expect her to earn the other."

I grinned. "Lost outside. She might come back looking for it."

"She? These days it could be a man. I'll hold it for a few days. If no one claims it, it's yours."

"I've no use for it. The odds are against my meeting a one-eared woman. Or a one-eared man."

"You never know, but if you do, it will be a blonde. I can't see a dark-haired woman going for a colored stone like this. I saw you looking around out there. Are you a cop? The police said they were all through."

"I work for the defense attorney. You're the manager who followed Nelson? Mrs. Byrne?"

"I come on at six every morning. He'd get very angry if I was a minute late."

"Understandable. He hadn't reached the point where he had to have a nip during working hours, but he was close."

"Many days I could use a little nip myself."

"I don't suppose you could come up with surprising new ev-

idence that would exonerate our client, could you?"

"I didn't even see anything I could sell to the tabloids. You know—killer had two heads, says eyewitness. I feel so sorry for Nelson. I wouldn't work this place at night for double what they're paying, but he didn't mind. He'd wink and say it gave him all day to fool around while his wife was at work. I put that down to just talk."

"All you saw was the car?"

"Heard it, mostly. By the time we got out, it was turning left, away from the street light, which didn't help."

"Strange. The kid lives in the opposite direction."

She seemed amused. "All he had to do was circle the block. If that's the best you can do, your client is cooked. Do you intend to buy something or continue wasting your time?"

"The day I consider speaking with an attractive woman a waste of time, start rehearsing the choir."

She smiled. "Keep talking, Don Juan. You just might persuade me to earn the other earring. No kinky stuff, though."

I grinned, waved, drove out the entrance and turned left, which happened to be the way I was going anyway.

The sister had married a man named Gates, who had done well enough to afford a very nice

Colonial tucked away behind a scattering of huge oaks. The doorbell was answered by a tall, heavy man; half bald, a square stern face. Executive type.

"Mr. Gates? Let me express my condolences."

"Do I know you?"

"No. I'm a friend of your sister-in-law—"

"Then go express your condolences to her. She needs them far more than I."

He didn't seem broken with grief, which meant nothing. Both breast-beaters and the seemingly unaffected were capable of forgetting and remarrying within six months—or remembering and disintegrating afterward. Grief was unique and personal.

"You know what happened to Nelson?"

"Since it was headline news, I could hardly miss it. Tragic, but I have troubles of my own. Exactly what do you want?"

"I'm working with the attorney. Defending the man—"

"And you're a friend of Nelson's widow?"

"The man is still entitled to the best defense he can get. I'd like to ask you two questions, if you don't mind."

"I mind." The door began to close.

I shrugged. "Have it your way. We can always subpoena you for the trial."

The door paused. "What in the hell for?"

"Specifically, your inheritance of a half-million-dollar trust fund and your whereabouts when Nelson so conveniently died before your wife."

The door slammed shut. "*Serve your damned subpoena!*"

Two down. Nothing learned.

Nelson's second address was an apartment building complex, the apartment on the second floor rear of one of the units. Didn't seem logical that Nelson would rent a relatively expensive apartment merely to get another set of credit cards. I found a mailbox in the lobby marked WATKINS/CRAMER.

Nelson's saying the night shift gave him time to fool around during the day might not be just talk. Then again, maybe he'd simply made a deal with Watkins to use the address. Of course. And you're young and handsome, J. K.

I went up and pushed the buzzer, feeling myself scrutinized through a peephole. I smiled my best smile, which on its best day has never been all that great.

The feminine voice was muffled. "What is it?"

"My name is J. K. Bonner. I'm a friend of Nelson's."

"He never mentioned any J. K. Bonner."

"He mentioned you. How else would I know?"

The door opened, but she didn't invite me in.

Ms. Watkins was tall and slim and in her early twenties. The wild blonde ringlets falling to her shoulders had been created in a salon, but the shape under the blouse and tight jeans was original equipment. Dangling earrings, matching necklace, jingling bracelets on both arms. The earrings ended in large red stones, more or less justifying Mrs. Byrne's observation about a blonde's preference for a color accent.

The whites of the dark eyes below the brown eyebrows were slightly bloodshot, her lids red-rimmed—the signs of grief lacking in Gates.

"What do you want?"

"I lied. I wasn't a friend of Nelson. I'm a private investigator for the attorney defending the man the police say killed him."

"Do you think I'd do anything to help him? Get out."

"Suppose he isn't guilty?"

"Who else could be?"

"You for one."

She tossed her head angrily, tresses flying, jewelry clinking. "Are you crazy? I loved him."

"I'm sure you did. Why else would you set up housekeeping with a married man? I'd bet this tidy little arrangement began as an office romance. He was work-

ing for the paper company. So were you. He was making enough money then to hold up his end of the deal. I'd also bet he promised to divorce his wife and marry you. Then you both lost your jobs and the bills mounted. He was still coming around, but you know a break-up is only a matter of time and divorce is now a dream. He's going to kiss you goodbye any day. Might have done it last Friday, so you shot him Saturday morning. Sound possible?"

"You're—you're—*despicable!*"

"Actually I'm warm, sensitive, and compassionate."

"Get out. Now. Or I call the police."

"Okay. I'm not interested in proving that you did it. If you don't have an alibi, Larson's attorney can put you on the witness stand, point out you had a good, old fashioned, woman-scorned motive, and let the jury decide if that was stronger than an angry drunk's. Good luck."

"*Get out!*"

"You'll never know what a pleasure it was meeting you."

Still raining as I walked to my car. Depressing to see a friend draw a loser in the matrimonial sweepstakes.

Cadogan was out when I reached his office, but his paralegal searched out a few credit card statements for me.

I used my cell phone to call Vanisci.

"When it comes to owing money, this guy Gates makes Nelson look like a piker," he said. "Is that what you were looking for?"

"Exactly. If the man wasn't holding his dying wife's hand at six Saturday morning, Feliciano will very carefully point it out to the jury."

"Am I all through here? I've got to get back to my my paying clientele."

"Just stay out of jail. The world needs you."

The rain had settled to a drizzle when I drove out to see Sharon. Nelson had naturally bought a house larger and more expensive than they needed. Stone center hall with a sweeping lawn on a wide, tree-lined street, driveway at the side leading to a stone garage at the rear where, recovered from the convenience store lot, Nelson's car was hemmed in by Sharon's. His was bright red; hers a gleaming black enhanced by the beaded raindrops. I thought of Feliciano: *all cars today look like upside-down bathtubs with headlights.*

She must have seen me arrive because the kitchen door opened as I walked up the driveway.

She smiled. "If you're checking on me, the first day on the job was a success. Come in. I have fresh coffee. Big help, fresh cof-

fee for someone with my problem. Did you know that, J. K.?"

"So I've heard."

Hot and muggy outside. Cool in the air-conditioned kitchen.

She poured. "Find out anything?"

I sipped the coffee. "Always a thing or two to be learned, but in my travels I kept wondering why you asked me to look into it."

"I told you. I had the feeling—"

"—that an innocent man had been charged. Never knew you were clairvoyant or had ESP, and with your problems, Larson's really should have been the furthest thing from your mind." The coffee tasted bitter, but that might have been because I hadn't eaten all day. "I think I now know the real reason."

"Real reason?"

"You were too shaky for someone who had only begun to drink again. You'd been at it for some time before Nelson died. You found out about her, didn't you?"

She studied her coffee cup like a gypsy reading tea leaves before saying softly, "I seldom looked at credit card statements, but I happened to see the name of a woman's shop on one. I hadn't bought anything there. Being stupid, I thought someone had used our card. Until I realized how ridiculous that

was. He'd obviously bought something for another woman." She shrugged again. "As usual, the faithful spouse was last to know."

He must have thought he was using one of the cards from his other address. Or maybe he hadn't given a damn.

"The paper trail will trip you up every time. That's why career criminals deal only in cash."

"Imagine how I felt. It was more than learning he was seeing another woman. Dammit, I'm fighting to stay sober—with no support from him, I might add—picking up a few dollars through the temp service to postpone living in a car, and he's spending money on *some bimbo*?"

Her voice rose, the last three words reverberating from the kitchen cabinets. If she ever found out *how much* he'd spent on his mistress, she'd want to dismember his body and scatter the pieces to the four winds.

"Did he ever mention a trust fund?"

The puzzlement in her voice was genuine. "Trust fund?"

"Courtesy of his grandfather. For Nelson and his sister. To be split at the end of the year if both survived, but if one died, the other would get the money immediately."

She seemed to have difficulty

absorbing what I was saying. "Trust fund?"

"Nelson died first."

Elbows on the table, she held her head in her hands until she worked it out. "So his sister gets the money," she said dully.

"Fleeting. The way it worked out, Nelson died on Saturday. She died on Monday. Her husband inherits."

She made a strangled little sound and leaped to her feet. "*Damn you, J. K.! Why are you telling me this? Because you have a mean streak? All I wanted from you—*"

"Sit down."

She lowered herself into her chair, still trembling with anger. We could have been a loving couple having a domestic spat.

"Did you think I'd sit on anything I found?"

"Fat chance," she snapped. "Everyone knows you'd turn in your mother if you felt it was the thing to do."

I let the sweep second hand of the wall clock audibly chunk its way around the face twice.

"So why did you ask?"

She clasped her hands before her and took a deep breath. "I don't know. Laugh about my ESP if you like, but I was sure the boy hadn't done it. I guess I was hoping you'd find something his attorney could use to create—what do they call it?"

Reasonable doubt? And maybe you did."

She looked up at me. "That news about the trust fund hurts, but doesn't that give his sister's husband a motive to be sure that Nelson died first?"

"Yes, it does, particularly since I suspect his wife's illness cleaned him out. But that isn't the reasonable doubt you were hoping I'd turn up."

"Oh? What was I hoping you'd turn up?"

"His mistress. Somehow you found out who she was and looked her over. Obviously she liked jewelry. But you weren't thinking reasonable doubt when you bought a set of earrings—"

I pulled the earring, now plastic-bagged and numbered, from my shirt pocket and extended it in the palm of my hand.

"—and dropped this one at the scene when you shot Nelson. You were hoping it would pin the killing on her. You really should have picked out something more her style, but maybe you couldn't afford it. Anyway, the police didn't find it. Kicked under a car or across the lot because they wouldn't have been too careful where they placed their feet when they got there. Then Larson fell into their laps, and they didn't bother looking for anyone else. There went your plan."

Her smile had the sincerity of

a model's. "Now really, J. K. Isn't that a little preposterous?"

"Not when you consider that statistics say the first person to look at is the spouse. Gave you a quandary to wrestle with. You're too decent to let a man go to prison for something he didn't do, yet you could hardly come out and say you'd killed your husband. So you called me in. You knew I'd find out about her, which would give Feliciano something to work with. How many people have an alibi for six o'clock on a Saturday morning? Even without the earring, there was your reasonable doubt. Since you really don't have ESP, you couldn't know I'd find the damned thing, much less connect it to you."

I've never considered myself overly intelligent or talented, but strange thoughts have a way of popping into my mind and not allowing me to rest until I've checked them out.

When I saw those red stones dangling from Ms. Watkin's lily-white lobes, I couldn't help but wonder if her jewelry chest held the mate to the one I'd found. If so, then she'd been there when Nelson was killed. Yet that small blue stone didn't seem flamboyant enough for her.

That was when the strange thought popped into my mind.

I found the name of a jeweler on one of the credit card state-

ments turned over to Cadogan, picked up the earring from Mrs. Byrne, and took it to the store.

Full description on the duplicate sales slip. When my finger got to the signature, the courteous young woman suffered a panic attack. She'd never seen a man turn green and appear ready to throw up.

I replaced the earring in my pocket and rose. "I'm sorry it had to be me, but you got what you wanted. Larson will go back to shooting bowling pins."

I hesitated at the door. She was sitting with her hands clasped in front of her, staring down at nothing.

"I'm sure you can come up with a reason why the earring was there. Like Nelson had them all along, maybe to return them because you couldn't afford them. Juries being juries, this one might even be sympathetic enough to wonder why, with a husband like Nelson, you waited so long. Your attorney can also bring in Gates' motive. Reasonable doubt should work for you as well as Larson, and you can't drink where you're going, so calling me might pay off yet."

A strong northeast wind now slanted the renewed rain. I handed the earring to one of the

D.A.'s men I'd asked to wait outside. Once the door closed, I knew she'd reach for a bottle, and while a male drunk can sometimes be comical, a female one is always pitiful.

Especially one you'd always been half in love with.

Rain pelting me, I watched them lead her out; shrunken and forlorn, lost between their bulk—but still sober. All I could do for her at the moment.

What someone else really feels is always a mystery. A psychiatrist might say that, full of remorse and guilt, she'd called me because she was subconsciously hoping I'd find the truth. Possible. She used to call me J. K. Bulldog because she said I never let go.

Convicted or not, either way she'd be left with more than remorse and guilt. She'd never again close her eyes at night or open them in the morning without thinking that if she'd divorced Nelson instead of shooting him she could have taken most of that money from him and spent her days lolling in a bikini in a chair on a Caribbean beach. She'd have been La Dame Riche. With or without a glass in her hand.

Instead of just a penniless, kill-in-haste, repent-at-leisure widow.

FICTION

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

William T. Sampson



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/97

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When he sauntered into the squad room that bright mid-May morning, Detective Joe Slattery raised the only other pair of eyebrows in the room, those of his partner Tom England. "What are you doing in the office on your wedding day?" England demanded.

"Came downtown to pick up the tux I rented." Slattery glanced hopefully at his desk, but it was just the way he'd left it the night before.

"So," England said, "go pick it up before somebody puts you to work. And don't pass Go on your way home."

"Anxious to get rid of me, aren't you?"

England laughed. "It's just that you have a knack for stumbling onto crimes in progress, and as your best man I'm charged with getting you to the church on time. That time being seven thirty, unless you've changed your mind."

"Not me," Slattery said. "But maybe Vicki has. I wouldn't blame her."

"C'mon, Joe. Vicki was as happy as a lark at rehearsal. She's *excited* about getting married."

"So am I," Slattery said. "Instead of spending my off-duty days courting, I can get down to some serious fishing."

The tux was okay, he decided;

as he carried the big Midtown Clothiers box along Thirty-eighth Street. It might not do much for the way he looked—the world would just have to go on putting up with that—but it did make him feel better. Fifty-one years young maybe, instead of fifty-one years old. Still a bit of swash in the old boy after all, he told himself. And maybe some buckle, too.

He really was uneasy about the wedding, though. By marrying him now, instead of waiting until his retirement, wasn't Vicki just putting it all on the line again—tempting fate to deal her another rotten hand? She'd scoffed at the idea, of course. They all had: everybody from Tom England to the department shrink. The danger of the job, they said, was something every cop's wife had to cope with, second time around or not.

But dammit, Vicki's case was different. She'd watched her first husband shot to death by a burglar, a punk who had then shoved her down a flight of steps. Slattery had caught the case; felt sorry for her; gone to see her nearly every day; sat with her all those months she'd been in a cast. So here she was, marrying a cop. A cop who loved her more than he'd thought he could ever love anyone again, but a cop nonetheless. A guy

who could retire in a year or so—or get blown away tomorrow.

As he waited for the walk light at a busy intersection, his thoughts were diverted by a woman with a Southern accent speaking in an unnaturally loud voice. She was standing about twenty yards away with a much younger blonde woman and a very tall man, whose back was turned to Slattery.

"Yer dang right I want in on it," she was saying, her words slow, measured, and forceful, as though she were calling the roll of states at a national political convention. "I'll just run right over there to the bank and get the money now." She started to walk away, but the tall man turned, put a hand on her shoulder, and spoke urgently to her.

Slattery couldn't hear what was said, but a wolfish grin appeared on his face. The man, whose most distinguishable feature (aside from his height above sea level) was a proboscis that was prodigious by any standards, just happened to be a longtime professional con artist named Vincent Puccini. In addition to an impressive string of arrests with two convictions, Puccini, somewhere along the crooked way, had acquired the endearing nickname Vinny the Pooh.

Slattery had never met the

Pooh in person, but the man's mug shot and his various nefarious affairs were well known to the cops of at least eleven states. The blonde would be his current cohort in the intricate process of separating senior citizens from their hard-earned savings. When the light changed, Slattery walked catercorner to the opposite side of the street and positioned himself beside a bus stop sign. After some heated conversation the blonde and the Southern belle, who looked in her sixties but who walked with the brisk, sure step of a marine gunnery sergeant, crossed to the Thirty-eighth Street branch of the Citizens National Exchange Bank and disappeared through the front door.

After ten minutes and several city buses had gone by, Slattery decided this might not be such an easy bust after all. He was also beginning to wish he hadn't left his revolver and handcuffs in the Bronco when he went to try on the tux. The Pooh was getting impatient, too, pacing the sidewalk and glancing at his watch. Slattery gave it another five minutes, then went across to the bank.

No sooner had he stepped inside than a man wearing a rubber head mask shoved a gun barrel against his side. "Just be cool, and you won't get hurt," he said from within the mask, which

bore a remarkable resemblance to Larry of the Three Stooges. My, my, Slattery thought, all sorts of naughty people stopping by the bank this morning. As if to underscore that idea, a second man in a Curly mask came over, gave Slattery a perfunctory pat-down, and told him to go sit on the floor with the other "guests."

There were five of them: three young women who were obviously bank employees, the Pooh's blonde assistant, and the woman with the stentorian voice, who was sitting off to one side. Slattery decided to join the latter, partly because she was the Pooh's intended mark but mostly because of the radiant smile she was beaming his way.

"I'm Henrietta Nicely," she said, extending a ring-covered hand, which he took without hesitation. "Back home everybody calls me Hank."

Slattery was instantly charmed. Up close, the voice wasn't all that imposing. "Joe Slattery," he said. "Looks like we picked a bad time to come to the bank."

"Roger on that," she said, then laughed. "I spend right much time on a microphone, so I forget myself sometimes." She told him she was a ham radio operator who presided over the Southern Gravy Net, a daily gabfest that covered several

states including her own, which was Georgia.

Again Slattery marveled at her voice. The words that poured from her were rich and flavorful, like good Southern cooking with just a dash of y'all-spice. "What part of Georgia?" he asked.

"Place called Honest. Which, if you're not familiar with that area, is right near Truly. I was the police dispatcher at Truly for a spell. Of course, in a place like Truly there isn't a whole lot to dispatch, if you know what I mean. Are you a cop, Mr. Slattery?"

Slattery winced at the unexpected question. He'd been watching, with a certain degree of incredulity, a third robber in a Moe mask scooping bundles of currency into a canvas bag near the vault behind the teller counters. "Who, me?" he said in an astonished tone. "I'm scared to death of guns and things."

"Funny, I can usually tell a cop," Nicely said.

"Will you people pipe down over there?" Moe snarled. He tossed two bags over the counter, then climbed across himself. "Listen up, everybody," he said. "We're leaving now, but I want all of you to stay on the floor for a full five minutes. Got that? Five minutes!" He handed one of the money bags to Larry, and the Stooges-three exited

stage right, which was the rear door to the parking lot.

Almost immediately a gruff voice on a bullhorn said, "Police! Drop your weapons, and get your hands up!" Several shots followed; then Moe and Company came barreling back into the bank, nearly falling over each other in their haste. An angry Moe demanded to know who had turned in the alarm, but again the bullhorn intervened: "You're surrounded, so come out of there with your hands in the air!" This time Slattery recognized the voice of his boss, Lieutenant Arnie Belcher.

Moe seized one of the tellers by the arm and hauled her forcibly to the back door. Holding her in front of him, he opened the door and shouted, "We've got hostages in here. If you want 'em to stay alive, back off!"

"Take it easy," Belcher said. "We'll talk about it, okay?"

Moe slammed the door and marched the young teller back to the group. He started to say something, then broke off and stood staring at a large black case near the loan officer's desk. The case was labeled CH-2 and bore the call letters of a local TV network affiliate. "What the hell is a Channel 2 box doing in here?" he asked of no one in particular.

A fairhaired woman in her

mid-thirties stood up and gave Moe a look that lay somewhere between defiance and disgust. "I'm the manager," she said. "They were going to interview me for the *Nita Daye Show*, but—"

"The *Nita Daye Show*?" Moe sounded impressed. "When?"

She glanced at her watch. "Right about now, only . . ."

" . . . only we scared them off," Moe said. A telephone rang just then, and he stalked off to the manager's office to take the call. "Watch these people," he told Larry over his shoulder.

Henrietta Nicely put a hand on Slattery's arm. "Speaking of big black boxes, what do you have in yours?"

So Slattery told her: about the wedding; about Vicki; even about Vicki's tragic experience; but not a word about his being a cop. Unarmed and outnumbered, he had only the element of surprise on his side—for whatever that was worth.

"A wedding! That's wonderful," Nicely cooed. "If we get out of here alive," she added. "Of course, if you were a cop . . ."

"Stop using that word!" Slattery hissed. "You'll give these guys wrong ideas."

"Well, if you were, you could start by arresting that blonde floozy over there. She and her creepy boyfriend tried to work a money scam on me." Nicely's

voice had gone back up several decibels, and the blonde gave her a surprised look.

Slattery's own eyebrows went up a notch. "How did you tumble to that?"

"I wasn't born yesterday," she drawled. "They told me some guy found a suitcase full of money he wanted to sell cheap. Said they'd split the loot with me if I could come up with five big ones. I played along, came in here, and wrote a note to the teller to call the cops, but these goons barged in before I could give it to her."

Slattery was grinning from ear to ear. "Next you'll be telling me this isn't even your bank."

"Does this look like Honest Fidelity and Trust?"

"At the moment I'd say none of the above."

"I'm up here visiting my sister. Just came downtown to cash a traveler's check and do some shopping."

"How's the fishing in Honest?"

Nicely studied his face to see if he might be pulling her leg. Then she smiled. "The place to go is Goodness. Lake over there has big-mouth bass as long as your arm."

"That's great," Slattery said, and meant it.

Moe came back into the lobby with a lit cigarette stuck in the mouth of the mask. "Guess what, guys—we're gonna be on

TV. I told that cop we want a helicopter ride outa here but to send in Nita Daye first. I'm gonna give that sweet little dish an interview she won't forget." Larry and Curly didn't appear overly impressed, but neither did they seem inclined to argue.

Nicely was a different kettle of fish. "Why don't you all just get in your helicopter and bug out of here so the rest of us can go home?" she suggested.

"And why don't you just shut that oversized mouth?" Moe countered.

"We have lives to lead, too," she persisted. "And Mr. Slattery here is fixing to get married tonight."

Slattery winced again. Sharing a confidence with Henrietta Nicely, he decided, was about the same as going on *Meet the Press*. Moe's eyes lit up. "Oh he is, is he? That gives me an even better idea."

Before he could elaborate, the bullhorn crackled, and Belcher said, "Listen up, Moe. We can't let Ms. Daye come into the bank, but we will send in her cameraman on one condition: you release one of the hostages immediately and another when the videotape is completed . . ."

"Videotape!" Moe mumbled. "I wanna be on live camera."

" . . . then the tape will air on the evening news—if you keep it clean and hold it to three min-

utes or less. If you agree to those terms, send out the first hostage now."

Moe grouched some more about the videotape, then pointed to one of the tellers, a young woman who had been sobbing quietly. "You!" he said. "Stop that sniveling, and get outa here. And make it fast before I change my mind." He sauntered over to Slattery. "So you're getting married, are you?"

Slattery gave him an expressionless look.

"Tell you what, man. You come with me, and we'll telephone your cutie and invite her down here."

Slattery had a slightly different suggestion as to where the Stooges could go, but instead he said, "No way, mister," his eyes narrowing dangerously.

There was a knock at the door then. "Check that out," Moe snapped, and Curly hurried to obey.

"Camera guy," he said, and unlocked the door.

As everyone watched expectantly, a man carrying a video camera backed into the lobby. "Just me," he said airily. "Don't shoot."

It was Tom England.

Again the wolfish grin crept across Slattery's face. He hadn't the slightest notion how England's presence might help, unless Belcher had a plan. But

then, neither man could have known Slattery was inside the bank. At any rate he was glad to see his partner and winked ever so slightly as England's quick glance of assessment swept over his face. To his great credit England didn't betray the slightest sign of recognition. Instead, as Curly made a half-hearted attempt to pat him down for a weapon, he turned to the head Stooge. "You must be Moe," he said.

"Yeah. Who're you?"

"I'm Tom." England strode over to the Channel 2 storage box, opened it, and peered inside. Standing with his back to the Stooges, he made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger and raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Slattery, who shook his head a fraction of an inch.

"What the hell are you doing?" Moe demanded suspiciously.

England turned around. "Some lights in the box here, but I don't think we'll need them. Look, I'm sorry they won't let Nita in, but the tape will air on the six o'clock news with—" he turned and looked directly at Slattery—"Ann Kolster."

"Never heard of her," Moe said. "Is she as foxy-looking as Nita Daye?"

"Much more so!" England shouldered the video camera. "Now, how do you want to do this?"

For all his previous posturing, Moe had a hard time finding anything to say with the camera running until Nicely stood up and announced that she was going to act as an interviewer. After a short, heated exchange, Moe grudgingly agreed, and things went surprisingly well, Nicely delineating in her Southern syllables the scenario inside the bank and the disposition of the hostages, and, whether by accident or design, providing a peek at the psyche of a very vain but not-too-bright bank robber.

Not to be outdone, Moe reiterated his demand for a helicopter and unveiled his fanciful scheme of staging a televised wedding and subsequent honeymoon flight to freedom, using the newlyweds as insurance for himself and his fellow felons. He even went so far as to implore the bride-to-be (he admitted he didn't know her name) to drop everything and hurry down to the bank for the big event, a ploy that very nearly provoked Slattery into doing something reckless.

At that point England called a halt to the proceedings. "They'll edit the whole thing anyway," he explained to Moe. "But now I want some footage of you standing there in front of the counter." Sighting through the viewfinder, he began backing across the lobby until he was very close to

Slattery. "We'll use this for fill footage," he said, "with Ann Kolster doing the voice-over." He was all but stepping on Slattery's feet now. "I want to get a low-angle shot, Moe, so turn your head to the side and pretend you're saying something to the other guys there." England was on his knees now, the video camera running steadily. "Yeah, that's good! Wait till Ann Kolster gets a look at this!"

Slattery kept thinking, who the hell is this Ann Kolster anyway? Then it dawned on him. Giving Nicely a meaningful look, he put a finger to his lips and with his other hand snaked a Colt .32 automatic from the ankle holster strapped to England's right leg. With that England was ready to leave. "Which of these people goes out with me?" he asked.

"Let's don't be in any hurry about that," Moe said, a nasty smirk on his face. "I want this guy Slattery to call his chick and get her down here so we can tape their wedding."

"You leave Mr. Slattery alone!" Nicely said vehemently. She was giving Slattery a look of pure adoration—seasoned with just a pinch of I-knew-you-were-a-cop-all-the-thyme.

Moe walked over and stuck his mammoth revolver in Slattery's face. "Let's go," he said.

Slattery, more concerned that

Nicely might give him away than with Moe's cavalier attitude, climbed to his feet and, without being told, headed for the small office and the telephone. When the answering machine cut in on the third ring, Slattery handed the receiver to Moe. The voice was Vicki's, telling him to leave his name and number and his call would be returned as soon as possible. Moe had no way of knowing that Slattery had dialed his own number. Vicki had made the outgoing message months earlier. "We'll try again," he said. "Every ten minutes."

Slattery shrugged. "She's probably out shopping or rounding up stuff for the reception."

The knock on the door came simultaneously with the arrival of the helicopter while the attention of everyone, including the cops, was riveted on the racket and the fact that the big Sikorsky was coming to roost in the parking lot at the rear of the building. So no one noticed—except Slattery, whose special senses seemed to be on permanent alert status. But before even he could guess what it meant, the door opened wide (Larry apparently having forgotten to relock it), and in walked Vicki Daniels, looking absolutely smashing.

Slattery hurried to her side. "How'd you know?"

"The car radio," she said. "They talked with the teller who was released."

"Well, well, 'well,'" Moe said, coming up behind them.

Slattery swept Vicki into his arms and whispered in her ear: "Tom is here, too, but these guys don't know we're cops."

"Okay," she said. "I understand."

"So this is the bride-to-be," Moe purred. "Ver-ee nice! Now we can get the show on the road. Since we don't have a preacher, I'll do the honors. But that's—" he broke off as the phone rang, this time taking the call at the loan officer's desk.

Slattery steered Vicki over to where Henrietta Nicely, Tom England, the bank manager, and the remaining teller were seated on the floor. It was Nicely who brought Vicki up to date on the situation, speaking in what for her amounted to a mere whisper. When she finished, Vicki put a hand on Slattery's arm. "Joe, I don't think I want even a make-believe wedding here, and I know I don't want to leave in a helicopter, especially with these men."

Slattery could scarcely believe his ears. Unless he was very much mistaken, Vicki had just told him to get cracking and make like a cop. But what could

he do? The .32 automatic in his pocket changed the odds a little but not much. All three of the Stooges were armed and alert. Moe was perhaps the most dangerous. If he had a weakness, it was his vanity—and maybe his choice of weapon: a big .44 Magnum Ruger revolver with an eight inch barrel. A thought Slaterry had earlier dismissed as foolhardy came back to him now. He looked at Tom England and said, "I think I feel a plan coming on."

"Lord help us," England murmured.

The moment Moe cradled the telephone, Slaterry stood up. "I have to go to the bathroom," he announced.

"That's just tough," Moe said.

"I'm not fooling, fella, I gotta go." Slaterry turned to the branch manager and quirked an eyebrow.

She pointed across the room. "Through the access door to the teller area."

"Thanks." Slaterry moved purposefully in that direction.

"Oh for God's sake," Moe said. "Curly, go with him. And hurry it up. Soon as you're back, we do this wedding bit."

When Slaterry reappeared five minutes later, he was alone. "Where the hell is Curly?" Moe demanded.

Slaterry hooked a thumb over

his shoulder. "Said he'd be out in a minute."

"Go check on him, Larry," Moe snapped.

Slaterry didn't see Tom England trying to get his attention. Nor did he notice Henrietta Nicely, who was the reason for England's frantic signaling. Nicely had walked to the water fountain at the far end of the lobby beyond the teller access door, fished an aspirin from her oversized handbag, and was in the process of taking it. As Larry went through the door, Slaterry began a carefully timed walk toward Moe, who was standing in front of the teller counter. "Got a cigarette?" Slaterry said. "I left mine in the car."

Moe gave him a contemptuous look. "What's wrong, you getting nervous about the wedding?"

Slaterry, who hadn't smoked for eight years, shook his head. "Never been up in a helicopter before." He was standing directly in front of Moe now, his right hand extended casually as if for a cigarette.

Instead Moe produced the Ruger and leveled its impressive barrel at Slaterry's midsection. "Don't come any closer," he said.

Slaterry poised himself on the balls of his feet and kept the hand where it was. Then Lar-

ry's voice came from behind the access door. "Hey, Moe! Curly's tied up back here on the floor!" All the while Slattery had been watching Moe's eyes behind the mask, eyes that were steely and rock steady. But at the sound of Larry's voice Moe blinked.

And Slattery pounced.

His big hand clamped viselike around the hammer of the revolver and Moe's thumb, preventing the weapon from firing. His left hand then found Moe's elbow, and he quickly had the surprised gunman facedown on the floor. "Tom!" Slattery said, but England was already at his side. Slattery handed him the Ruger, then plucked the .32 from his own back pocket just as Larry burst through the access door. "Police, freeze!" Slattery shouted.

"Freeze!" England echoed. And Larry obeyed, but he still held the weapon.

By then, of course, Slattery saw Nicely standing directly behind Larry. "Drop the gun!" Slattery said. Dammit, didn't Nicely know she was in his line of fire? "Drop it, Larry," he said. "It's all over."

This time Larry did as he was told. Not as a favor to Slattery but because Henrietta Nicely had brought her heavy handbag down on top of his head. Startled nearly out of his wits, Larry cried out, "Don't shoot me!" and

threw himself on the floor in a spread-eagle position.

Slattery walked over and retrieved the revolver. He looked at the lady from south Georgia, who was standing there smiling widely, and said, "Nicely done, Hank."

"Well, we made it," Slattery said as the last of the wedding guests left the reception line. "In spite of Belcher, the captain, the Feds, the president of the bank, and the preliminary paperwork, we made it to the church on time."

"And Nita Daye," England said. "Don't forget her."

"Yeah. You know, she's not so goodlooking up close. Moe might have been disappointed."

"Neither is Ann Kolster," England said, and they both laughed.

Henrietta Nicely had been smiling all evening. "It was a beautiful wedding," she said, "and thank you so much for inviting me."

"We enjoy your company," Vicki told her.

"Too bad the Pooh didn't stick around," Slattery said, "but when we release his girlfriend she may lead us straight to him."

"I know you'll catch him," Nicely said. She placed a hand on Vicki's arm. "You must be very proud of your husband."

Was this the first time you'd seen him in action?"

"As a matter of fact, it was."

"I guess you'll worry about him more than ever now."

For the third time that day Slattery went into his wincing mode, but again Vicki surprised him. "Not really. According to Joe, that sort of thing is all in a day's work. So about the only problem I have with his job is that I don't get to see much of him."

As Slattery was switching to his little-used euphoric mode, he heard Nicely saying, "Whenever you all get down to Geor-

gia, be sure to look me up, you hear?"

"We certainly will," Vicki assured her.

"I'm taking two weeks off in the fall," Slattery said. "Don't be surprised if we turn up with our fishing tackle."

Nicely scribbled on a white card. "Here's my address and phone number in Honest. Stop by and I'll take you to that bass lake I mentioned."

"The one in Goodness?"

"That's the one."

Slattery took the card. "Exactly what I need," he said, "an Honest to Goodness fishing trip."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

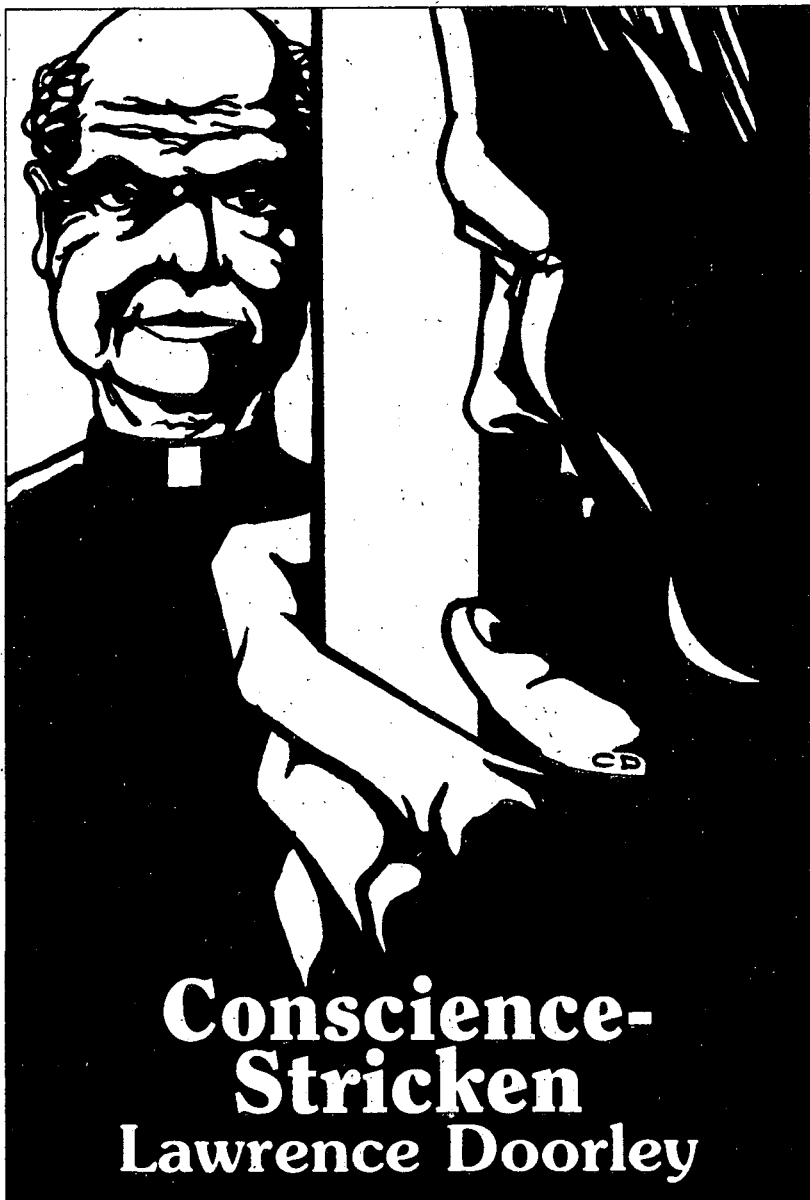


Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

The Puzzle of the Unstriped Umbrella. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION



Conscience- Stricken

Lawrence Doorley

Illustration by Chris Doorley

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/97

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Sobbing hysterically, mealy-mouthed Lester Botts confessed that he had murdered his wife, buried her in a ditch on the old Wombsy farm. Unfortunately the confession was made to the horrified Reverend Percy Paltry, vicar of St. Anne's in the Copse, Nether Fenny, Cheshire, England.

The poor vicar; a kind, sweet, little roly-poly chap in his late fifties, he had finally come to terms with his dear wife's death. She had died ten years before, leaving him with a little trust fund to augment his pittance at St. Anne's. And since St. Anne's was a small parish, the vicar was able to fulfill his religious duties with commendable thoroughness while still having much free time to pursue his several hobbies—hiking over the moors, bird watching, working on his history of the parish. And for the past year and a half he had enthusiastically taken up painting, copying works of famous artists with the intention of creating his own work once he mastered the technique.

He was contented. All was about as right as could be expected from a less than perfect world. His parish history was going well. He'd recently sighted a rare red-combed Wellesley waxwing. And only two weeks before, a rock-ribbed backslider

had agreed to give the Lord a second chance.

But it was his painting that was giving him the most pleasure. Using color photos of famous paintings as his subjects, he was steadily gaining confidence. He had painted two Monets and a Cézanne when he succumbed to Jean-François Millet's paintings of rural life.

Millet was one of the first painters to endow rural life with dignity, to depict the humble peasant as a heroic figure. By that fateful day in December 1992 when his world fell apart, the vicar had painted Millet's *The Gleaners* and *The Winnowers* and was eagerly awaiting the arrival of spring so he could hurry out to the abandoned Wombsy farm and copy the *Man with the Hoe*, Millet's most famous painting.

Then Lester Botts ruined everything. Sworn to secrecy by the law of confidentiality, the heartsick vicar could only hope the police would soon realize that the most likely suspect was innocent, that the real murderer was a spineless, lily-livered mother's boy, Lester Botts.

Poor Botts, done in by a painted hussy. Why hadn't he listened to his mother?

"Promise your mother, Lester, you'll stay away from painted

hussies when I'm gone," Mother Botts had droned on endlessly, ever since her husband had skedaddled to America with a henna-haired jezebel in 1971.

"Please, Mother," begged Lester, "don't talk about leaving."

"Promise me."

Lester promised. So passed the miserable years in the neat stone cottage on the outskirts of Nether Fenny. Lester did the housework, his mother a full-fledged valetudinarian. He also did the cooking. Nothing was wasted. Parsimony ruled. Lester was also the handyman, his knowledge gained from many Do It Yourself paperbacks.

No mother ever had a more devoted son than Mrs. Botts. But she never told him so. And oh how he yearned for a word of praise, something as simple as "You did a good job scrubbing the kitchen floor, son."

The kitchen floor sparkled, the whole house sparkled. But everything sparkled in bleak silence; as Mother Botts was simply unable to praise her devoted son. Life had warped her. It was a wonder that the poor man, henpecked, browbeaten, downcast, didn't suddenly grab his mother's heavy hawthorn stick and bash her over the head seven or eight times.

Oh, many times—God forbid—Lester moaned to himself that if it weren't for his job in

Litton Manor (a bustling manufacturing town six miles from Nether Fenny where he was an overworked and underpaid assistant shipping clerk at an export firm, giving him a chance to escape five days a week), he might have done something awful.

For though he was a spineless pipsqueak, a craven weakling, there still lurked within his spindly frame a sliver of the immutable link to a more primitive time when bashing the female over the head was the brutish male's birthright. And we only need remember what The Bard has written:

*The smallest worm will turn,
when trodden on.*

Trodden on once too often, Lester Botts turned in wild fury. He committed murder, killed a human being. It wasn't his mother. That bitter creature abruptly passed away in front of his telly in March 1992. Left behind was her only offspring, a thirty-nine-year-old balding beanpole with a mania for mopping, dusting, scrubbing, polishing. By his mother's death the mania was ingrained. And it boded ill.

Lester was devastated by his mother's death. It fell to the Reverend Mr. Paltry to take charge. He rounded up two dozen mourners including the pallbearers—not an easy task,

since Lester and his mother had never been churchgoers, had always led reclusive lives.

After the cheap casket had been lowered into the grave, the vicar dragged grief-stricken Lester into the warm vicarage for tea and crumpets prepared by Mrs. Zebley, who came in three days a week to do the house-keeping. While the vicar hung up Lester's ragged coat and his treasured brown cap with its winter flaps (a Botts trademark), Lester grabbed a handful of crumpets. Then the vicar, slowly sipping his tea, talked soothingly to the bereaved. He said that he knew it was a wrenching experience, losing a loved one.

"I speak from melancholy experience," he said. "But life goes on, Lester, and you must reconcile yourself to the fact that your mother is at peace. And I believe that, after a decent interval, you should begin to mingle with the villagers. Even stop in at the Ram's Head for a pint once in a while."

"Oh, vicar, I couldn't do that," Lester protested. "Why, Mother . . . poor Mother . . . what am I going to do without her?" He broke off, jumped up, grabbed his coat and cap, headed for the door. He hesitated.

"Would there be any crumpets for me to take home, vicar?" he asked.

"They're all gone, Lester, but Mrs. Zebley will make some more, and I'll bring them out to you."

"That'll be good," the poor man blubbered as he went, wrapped in his ancient coat, wearing his funny old cap.

Oh my, the vicar thought. The poor soul. Well, I'm going to do everything possible to help him.

Which he did, bicycling to the cottage on Saturdays or walking other times (the cottage was slightly over a mile from the village) and always taking a little something prepared by Mrs. Zebley.

But the visits were very uncomfortable.

"Sweeping, dusting, polishing," the vicar told Mrs. Zebley, "or running to the kitchen windows to see if his flowers out front or the vegetables in his little garden out back have grown any in the last ten minutes. He can't sit still. And woe betide a wee mote that has somehow found its way into that spotless house."

"Hmm," snorted Mrs. Zebley, a lick-and-promise housekeeper with fading eyesight. "It just ain't natural for a man to be that persnickety. Agin nature. Ah . . . any sign he's taken up with a woman?"

"None that I can see," the vicar said, smiling a little.

"Well, it'll take time," predict-

ed Mrs. Zebley. "The village nibnoses is bettin' that Botts'll get himself hooked by some dyed-haired floozy before the leaves fall."

The village nibnoses—Mrs. Zebley was a member in good standing—proved to be right. Lester fell for a dyed-haired floozy well before the leaves changed color. It took a while. He grieved, went to work, bought his skimpy groceries at a Litton Manor supermarket, came home, scrubbed, dusted, polished, went to bed.

Then spring burst forth. Birds chirped madly. Flowers bloomed furiously. The air turned soft, sweet, seductive. And girls appeared in chattering coveys in Litton Manor. They wore short, swishy dresses. They had slinky legs, saucy bosoms. They wriggled when they walked. No longer having to explain a ten or fifteen minute delay in arriving home as he used to, Lester began to go to the mall after work, peep around corners, ogle the girls. Inevitably the long-dormant primeval sap began to thaw.

All thawed out, decked out in his twenty-two-year-old Sunday best on a warm Saturday night in late June, he crept into the Purple Aviary, a noisy club in Litton Manor famed as a perching place for birds of exotic plumage. He was snared in late

August by a recent migrant from Australia, one Alice Higgins, a yellow-haired, double-chinned, perfumed, pudgy waitress.

In Lester's defense, Alice seemed to have a lot going for her. Cavorting among the tables in a little black outfit, her round face enhanced by several layers of makeup, she effectively disguised the fact that here was a ripe old bird long past the nestling stage.

At the marriage license bureau Alice giggled girlishly when the dour chap asked her age. She admitted to being "a nappy thirty-eight but still fulla the git up an' go. Hee hee hee."

She was also full of the Old Nick, being two weeks away from her fifty-fifth birthday. But back then she could have been twice that old: Lester was smitten, bewitched, on cloud nine. They were married by a magistrate in Liverpool and honeymooned in a cheap hotel in Blackpool over a long September weekend.

An old hand in the nuptial chamber, Alice—she had been married three other times—transported the poor besotted from cloud nine to seventh heaven, then clear out of the world.

"Why, why, why did I listen to Mother all those years?" he moaned ecstatically a dozen

times that week (actually it was only four times but it seemed like—well it was ten times better than in his wildest dreams).

Seventh heaven had a short run. Back in the glistening five room jewel in Nether Fenny, the quarry snared, Alice kicked off her shoes, wriggled out of her tight girdle, took off her dress, put on an old green wrapper, plopped down in front of the telly, and proceeded to munch and slosh herself into an even rounder, plumper pudgy on beer and ale, cheese and crackers, sardines, peanuts, ice cream.

That wasn't all.

"I'm a rotten housekeeper, Les," she announced right away. "Anyway, from the look of things you're doin' one hell of a job. Keep at it."

Lester kept at it, somewhat uneasy. Things got worse.

"Me and cookin' never hit it off, Les," Alice told him. "Kin you cook?"

Lester whimpered yes he could cook. Still, in spite of the new developments, it's worth it, he told himself. For though seventh heaven had sprung a leak, cloud nine still transported him right out of the world twice a week.

Then cloud nine fell apart. Sneaky, greedy Alice, supremely confident, instituted a barter system. The fare for a quick trip to paradise started out at a new

pair of shoes. Lester paid, an abject creature, famished from years of abstinence. And as with all monopolies, Alice kept raising the price. A costly winter coat was next, then a hideously expensive trip to Liverpool for a rock concert. Lester began talking to himself. At this rate Alice would have him in the poor-house before the year was up, for she could spend more in a week than he and his wonderful mother spent in three months. What am I going to do? the poor, miserable fellow moaned every morning as he drove to work in his eleven-year-old car.

Meantime, the vicar had cut down his trips to the Botts place, finding it more and more difficult to cope with Lester's jumping-jack activities. And he had manfully resisted Mrs. Zebbley's broad hints that it was his duty to keep on seeing how Lester was doing.

One day in late October she issued an ultimatum.

"Now, on your way to the farm for your painting on Saturday, vicar," she told him, "be sure you stop at the Botts place. I don't want any hemming and hawing from you. There's something fishy going on."

"Something fishy, Mrs. Zebbley?"

Mrs. Zebbley explained. The Quigley girl, who worked at a jewelry store in the mall in Lit-

ton Manor, had told her mother that Lester "an' a tubby, peroxidized old bat" came in last Thursday and bought the bat a bracelet that cost ninety quid.

"Ninety pounds," stammered the vicar. "Lester Botts spending that kind—and—and a woman. Oh my, what is going on?"

"That's what you're gonna find out."

So, not happy, the vicar loaded up his painting paraphernalia and a homemade cake from Mrs. Zebbley and bicycled out of the village on a gorgeous autumn morning.

It was a depressing visit, so depressing that though conditions on the isolated Wombsy farm were ideal for painting, the vicar's mood kept him from accomplishing anything. After an hour or so he headed home. Troubled by the situation at the Botts place, he failed to stop before going into the main road. If a car hadn't swerved, he would have been hit. As it was, the driver screamed at him, calling him a "damn stupid idiot." Which I indeed am, the vicar agreed.

He had been home for less than an hour when Mrs. Zebbley appeared.

"My goodness, Mrs. Zebbley," he exclaimed as he opened the front door for her. "You aren't due until Monday. And how did

you know I wasn't still at the farm?"

"Word gets around. And you know right well why I'm here. What's the story at the Botts place? That ninny really keepin' a woman?"

Actually the vicar was glad to see the housekeeper. He was so upset he needed to talk to someone. He told her what had happened. She managed not to interrupt, only permitting an occasional exclamation ("My goodness!" "Well, I never!" "You mean that—" "Who'da believed it!" "Well, that takes the cake.").

And that's exactly what the widow Quigley said when Mrs. Zebbley hurried home to spread the word via telephone.

"Him, that nincompoop, married?" said the widow. "Well, if that don't take the cake. But don't stop, tell me everything."

Which Mrs. Zebbley did, from the beginning, the vicar knocking at the door, a long wait, finally Lester, "carryin' a broom and a dust pan, peeping out.

"Botts was flabbergasted," Mrs. Zebbley went on ("Taken aback," the vicar had described it). "Tried to shut the door sayin', 'Sorry, vicar, we're busy.' But he didn't get away with it. 'Who the hell is it?' someone yelled. 'It's the vicar, hon,' said Botts in a blubbery voice" ("A high-pitched, pathetic quaver, almost hysterical").

"Who was it who said, 'Who the hell is it?'" demanded Mrs. Quigley.

"It was her, who else do you think?" snapped Mrs. Zebley. "The wife." Happy, happy, Mrs. Zebley waxed on. She said, said Mrs. Zebley, "Well, show him in. It's about time somebody from this stinky village came to see us."

So Botts, said Mrs. Zebley, took the vicar over to where she was sitting at a little table loaded with all kinds of junk ("A heterogeneous detritus indicative of an abundance of snacking"), and Botts said, "This is Alice, my wife."

"Well," continued Mrs. Zebley, "she started to get up, grabbed the table, it upset, over went beer cans, sardine tins, all sorts of junk. Botts near keeled over" ("The poor, stricken man, my heart went out to him").

"If that don't take the cake," said Mrs. Quigley once more. "But what does she look like?"

"Well, you know the vicar. Never a bad word about anybody." But Mrs. Zebley could read between the lines ("A somewhat stout individual with peculiarly colored hair and a few of time's ravages showing, the poor woman").

"Take it from me, Opal," Mrs. Zebley told her, "her nibs is nothin' more'n a fat old painted floozy that somehow tricked

that nitwit into marrying her, and you can bet she'll take him for every quid he's got. Mark my words."

By five thirty it was all over the village that a fat old cow had hooked poor, stupid, mother's boy Lester Botts. And since the whole village was well aware of Lester's penchant for pen-nypinching and persnicketyness, no one at all gave the union any chance of lasting until New Year's.

And it didn't. Wallowing in loot—the latest a flaming red dress from an upscale Litton Manor boutique—Alice overplayed her hand. She was driving poor spineless Lester half crazy. She finally drove him all the way.

He killed her on Friday, December fourth, his fortieth birthday. That morning the sly minx—having been alerted by a note on the calendar that it was Lester's birthday—got up early, made his favorite breakfast. And she promised him "the best birthday ya ever had."

"Your favorite liver an' onions for supper and a birthday cake made by your own honeybunch. Then—hee hee—how 'bout I wear my naughty little blue nightie tonight? Like that, hon?"

Naturally she expected to be recompensed later for her largess. She had her eye on a fur stole. Poor Lester, the poorhouse

temporarily obscured by all that pudginess exploding from that ounce and a half nightie, almost called in sick. But he hadn't missed a day in years, afraid of losing his job. Off he went, throbbing mightily.

Honeybunch didn't get a chance to wear her naughty little nightie. Forced to work three hours overtime and unable to phone her, since the company absolutely forbade employees from using the company phones for personal business, Lester finally made it home at eight thirty. He was dead tired, chilled to the bone, so hungry that the appetite associated with naughty blue nighties had sunk to deep second place.

Inside the house he turned to the telly, which was blaring with canned laughter. There she was. Her mouth was open. So was her dirty wrapper. She was snoring. The floor was littered with empty beer cans, sardine tins, debris of all kinds.

Poor Lester, he swayed, almost fell. He sobbed. Then he saw it: the framed picture of his dear, wonderful mother. It was on the floor, partly covered with cracker crumbs. The glass had cracked; a slimy sardine reposed arrogantly on his mother's pursed lips.

Lester went crazy. Shrieking hideously, he grabbed his mother's hawthorn walking stick,

leaped at the odious, open-mouthed, revolting creature. Afterwards, collapsed in a chair, gasping for breath, the enormity of his action not yet penetrating, he wondered why there was so little blood. There were only a few drops on the shiny wooden floor.

Mad laughter suddenly rang out. He squealed. He jumped up, staggered to the telly, turned it off. Then he fainted. He came to in about half an hour. Now slowly, in disbelief, reality began to penetrate. He had killed a human being, committed murder. He would go to prison. He would be locked in a cramped, vile, filthy, small jail with a brutal criminal as a cellmate.

He fainted again. This time he came to more quickly. He jumped up again, stumbled to the garage, found two scrubby-looking large garbage bags—seconds, rejects, bought at a discount store, the miserable shroud for the poor Australian pudgy.

He had a terrible time getting Alice from the chair, pulling one bag over her legs up to her blubbery waist, the other over her head. Sobbing constantly, he was on the verge of tying the two bags together when he saw the bracelet. He couldn't let her keep that. Maybe he could return it. He still had the receipt.

He tugged and pried, finally got it unclasped.

He dragged the poor old girl to the little garage, where it took an eternity to get most of her into the boot of his little car. Finally, close to midnight, as a forbidding moon partly obscured by clouds looked down and slivers of snow slashed through the cold night, with poor Alice's legs and a long-handled shovel sticking out of the boot, he drove the two miles to the Wombsy farm, where in the dear days of yesterday he had picked mushrooms, dewberries, wildflowers for his wonderful mother.

With the car lights out but the moon peeping down part of the time, poor, pitiful, pipsqueak Lester Botts buried fat Alice Higgins Botts in a ditch under four feet of dirt.

Back home, alternately sobbing, whimpering, he cleaned up the few drops of blood using bleach, scouring madly. That made that part of the floor a much lighter color. I'll have to varnish the whole floor, he whimpered.

He spent a horrible night. He peeped out of the bedroom window five times an hour to see if it was still snowing. It was. It stopped just before dawn, but it was noon before the snowplows opened the road to Litton Manor.

Then, after thoroughly in-

specting the boot of the car to be sure there was nothing suspicious, he drove to Litton Manor, bought a gallon of varnish on sale, hurried home, varnished the whole front room floor. That took over three hours.

By then he was starved. He devoured four waffles. He fell asleep then at the breakfast table. He awoke in a panic around eight o'clock. He had had an awful dream.

Constable Larkin, the law in Nether Fenny—an oldtimer who was quite content with his sinecure in a bailiwick where no one had ever been murdered—had stridden into Lester's horrible dream. He wore a deerstalker cap, was smoking a pipe, looked very professional.

"You say your spouse has left you, eh, Botts," the constable said. "I'm afraid that explanation doesn't hold water, Botts. For how do you account for her—any woman—leaving behind this bracelet, this red dress . . . Hmm. The label says it's from Helene's Designer Clothes in the mall. And what about all this feminine fluffery . . . these . . . ah . . . little nighties . . . Well, Botts, what have you to say?"

Poor Lester. It was one crisis after another. He had even hoped to return the red dress in addition to the bracelet. But now parsimony, the rock on

which his and his dear mother's lives had been built, lost out.

Weeping bitterly, he rounded up every one of Alice's belongings, stuffed it all into two more of the flawed garbage bags. The bracelet went in last.

"It's a sin to throw something that cost a fortune into the garbage," he wailed. "I can't do it. I can't do it."

He did it, the awful spectre of jail tilting the balance. He waited until eleven o'clock. Then he drove to Litton Manor, circled the export firm building three times. There was no one around. His heart in his mouth, he threw the two garbage bags into a huge dumpster, ran to his car, hurried home, sobbing all the way.

Totally exhausted, he slept a solid eight hours. On Sunday, a man in a dream, he managed to eat two scanty meals between dusting, mopping, polishing while constantly crying to his mother that he should have listened to her.

Came Monday. He planned to call in sick. Then, fearful that an abrupt change in his routine might arouse suspicion, he went to work. Never an inspiring-looking specimen, the gruesome weekend had left its mark.

"What the hell happened to you, Les?" one of his co-workers demanded. "You look like something the cat dragged in. The old

lady wearin' ya out? . . . ho ho . . ."

That nearly did it. Another second and Lester would have shrieked out that he had killed his wife. But the plant manager beat him to it.

"Let's go, let's go, get going," he yelled, "We got a big week. Come on, Botts, move it. You're in charge of shipping. Joe's got the flu. Wouldn't you know it. Botts, *move it*."

Lester moved it. It *was* a big week, a dozen different shipments bound for a dozen different countries. There was no further comment on Lester's appearance. By Friday as he drove home he had begun to think that maybe he was going to get away with it.

While all of this was going on, the little chubby vicar, all bundled up, had been making the rounds of the village, wishing one and all season's greetings. Mrs. Zebley had been against it, insisting he would catch his death of cold. But the rounds completed, she took a different tack.

"Now, vicar, you've been everywhere but the Botts place," she nagged. "And you're the one what's always talking about bringing the lost sheep back to the fold. Well, there's a pair for you. Now you get out there tomorrow an' see what's

what. And I hain't making no cake, either."

Dear Mrs. Zebley, the vicar thought; sometimes I feel like choking her. Of course the dear man didn't mean that.

Thus on Saturday the twelfth the vicar walked the mile to the Bottses' pretty little cottage. Invigorated by the crisp air, the bright sun, he was in good spirits, confident he could cope with whatever awaited him.

Lester, in apron and dust cap, was polishing the little dinner table when the vicar knocked. He threw his hands to his mouth, muffling a scream but almost choking on the dustrag. The vicar knocked again, a little louder. Lester stumbled to the door.

"Who . . . who . . . who is it?" he squealed.

"It's Paltry, Lester, the vicar. I've come to wish season's greetings to you and your spouse. I plan to stay only a moment or two."

The door flew open. There stood Lester, a spindly wraith in apron and dust cap.

"Oh, thank God it's you, vicar," Lester wailed. "I thought it—I mean . . . come in, come in, come in."

Oh my, thought the vicar. I may yet choke Mrs. Zebley. He went in, very uneasy. As Lester slammed the door shut, the vicar stole a glance toward the tel-

ly. It was off. The munchie table was nowhere in sight. Nor was Mrs. Botts. The vicar suddenly felt a funny squiggly-wriggling feeling up and down his backbone. Something was amiss.

"I seem to have come at a bad time, Lester," he said as his hand eased toward the door handle. "If your wife is indisposed, please convey season's greetings to her, and of course I wish good cheer and happiness to you. Now I had better be going."

He didn't go. Lester suddenly went crazy. With a mad, piercing scream he fell to the floor, grabbed the astonished vicar around the legs, held on while yelling, "She's gone, she's gone, she's gone, gone, gone, gone. She can't come back, never, never, never."

Good Lord, the thunderstruck vicar thought, the man's gone clear off the beam. But he tried to remain calm while attempting to pry Lester loose. That only made the crazed man tighten his grip.

"Now now, Lester," the vicar said quietly. "Come on now. I'm sorry that your wife has . . . left you, but perhaps it is only temporary. Now, let go of me so I can take off my coat and hat, and we'll talk about it."

"You don't understand, you don't understand," Lester shrieked. "She's buried on the

Wombsy farm. I killed her. I killed her."

"You . . . you . . . you what?" gasped the vicar. "You . . . you can't mean that. You can't be serious."

"I can. I am. It's all true, true, true," wailed Lester. "Oh, vicar, help me, help me. Please help me."

The vicar stayed late. Though his mind was in a terrible whirlwind, he managed to conceal it. He made tea. He prepared sardine sandwiches. He talked calmly, time after time repeating to Lester that his secret was safe with him.

"Once again," the dear man said wearily, "I have no intention of notifying the police. It would, as I've told you, be a violation of a sacred trust. To repeat: a minister of the gospel is bound by laws of confidentiality, sworn to secrecy, is prohibited from revealing privileged communications made to him by a distraught person."

"Then you can't tell anyone?" blubbered Lester.

"I've told you that, Lester. Even should I attempt to reveal what you have confessed to me—now, now, none of that . . . sit down . . . sit down . . . that's better—even if I wished to reveal your confession, it would not be accepted in a court of law. But as I've told you, it is vital that you go to the police. I have

no doubt, as you've told me, that you were under extreme provocation and that whatever happened was purely unpremeditated."

Each time the vicar said that, Lester leapt up, went into a wild whirling-dervish dance while squealing that he wouldn't go to the police. There'd be a trial. He would go to trial. He would be locked up for life with a vicious murderer as a cellmate. And he kept enumerating Alice's deficiencies. She was messy, real messy (Lester ignored the vicar's protest that "messiness is no reason for murder"). She was a crazy spendthrift. She couldn't cook ("Again, Lester, that is no reason for murder").

Then, as the wind began to blow outside and the sun began to sink behind the horizon, Lester had one more shock for the poor, incredulous vicar.

"And, vicar," Lester said, his voice lowering (the vicar had to lean closer), "I . . . I . . . I didn't want to tell you this. But she was a wicked, wicked woman. Maybe you'll see why I . . . why she drove me crazy. Before she would . . . let me take what all husbands are legally entitled to free and clear, she would . . . would make me promise to buy her an expensive present. Now . . ."

That did it. The vicar, his

pink face turning a fiery red, jumped up.

"Whoops, whoops," he went, "I, that is, the weather's changing. I must be going."

Grabbing his hat and coat, putting them on quickly, he headed for the door. He had heard one confession too many.

"Goodbye, vicar, goodbye," Lester wailed. "Remember your promise."

"I'll remember, Lester. I'll remember it."

He remembered. He slept only a few hours that night. He was confronted with a situation unlike anything he had ever faced before. For the remainder of life his lips were sealed, sealed from everyone, sealed from Mrs. Zebbley. "Oh my, oh my," the poor man moaned, "how am I ever to keep this dreadful secret from her? Help me, Lord, please help me," he begged.

Next day being Sunday, the vicar had to officiate at services. He delivered a short sermon based on the theme from 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive."

Of course Lester wasn't there. Nor was Mrs. Zebbley, who never missed a service. "Thank God," the vicar murmured, while hoping there was nothing seriously wrong with her. But of the sixty or so worshippers who were there, at least a dozen were cer-

tain that the sermon was directed at them.

Lester hadn't slept well either. For though Alice had appeared in the village only a few times, nosy old busybodies would soon begin to wonder if something had happened to her. By the middle of the afternoon Lester was convinced he had to do something. He phoned Constable Larkin.

"Huh? Your wife's flew the coop, and you want to come down and file a missing person report? Can't it wait till Monday?"

Lester whimpered that he had to work Monday.

"Okay. Come on down if you think you have to."

"So, she just up and left, eh?" Larkin said after Lester—his heart in his mouth—told his story. "Happens all the time. Wimmen; what kin you say? But you say it happened two Fridays ago? Let's see, that was the fourth. Kinda late in reporting, eh, Botts?"

Lester had prepared himself for that. A fellow had his pride. He didn't want the whole village to know his wife had left him.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said the constable, not caring one way or the other. "Well, I'll make enquiries."

"Enquiries?" gulped Lester.

"Yeah, someone reports a missing person, we make en-

quiries. That's what you want, right?"

No, no, that wasn't what he wanted. But he was stuck now.

"Sure," he managed. Then he asked if he could go.

Yep, that was all. At which Lester scurried out, leaving the constable shaking his head and muttering, "What a booby. No wonder she left him."

Enquiries consisted of the constable's putting the report on the police network and asking a few questions in the village. In spite of himself, he soon accumulated a file on the case. First, Mrs. Botts had not taken either of the two buses that stopped in the village. That was verified by the bus drivers and by Mrs. Auxley, who ran the combination grocery and post office and sold bus tickets.

Second, two different villagers who had been driving by the Botts place on the afternoon in question remembered seeing a large van parked there. Each agreed that it had REARDON'S USED FURNITURE displayed on the side, with a Litton Manor phone number.

Though he was sure it was just a case of a bored wife leaving a nitwit husband, regulations required that the constable send the file to headquarters in Litton Manor. That was that, he told himself.

As for the poor vicar, he spent

Sunday afternoon, the thirteenth, sitting in his study watching the burning logs in the fireplace slowly turn to ashes. For though he was convinced that he could withhold Lester's confession from the rest of the world no matter what happened, he anticipated Mrs. Zebley's appearing bright and early Monday morning: "All right, vicar, let's hear it. I'm not making a move till you tell me every single thing that happened at the Botts place on Saturday."

And she'll get me all upset. She'll trap me. What am I going to do? Again he begged the Lord for help. The Lord responded: the phone rang. It was Mrs. Zebley. The whole family had the flu, the worst-hit being the sneezing, hacking caller. Doc Barton figured it might even be the seven day flu. Could the vicar make out until she returned?

Stifling an impulsive little cheer, the vicar hastily replied that it would be tough but she was not to worry about him.

Nevertheless, when he hung up he couldn't keep from murmuring, "Oh, thank you, Lord." Then he told himself that since he had been given a reprieve he must make every effort to convince Lester to go to the police.

At ten that morning as he entered the combination store and post office to buy his beloved

Times, Mrs. Auxley had a bit of gossip.

"It's all over the village, vicar," she said. "Started by the constable's wife. Lester Botts came to the station last night to report that his wife left him. Now, it's my opinion—"

Mrs. Auxley's opinion was derailed, two post office patrons entering simultaneously. The vicar hastily grabbed a *Times*, put down the money, fled. Back in his study he pondered this new development. Obviously Lester hadn't confessed. That would have been the first thing Mrs. Auxley would have said.

Lester had simply filed a missing person report to throw the police off the track in case word got around that Alice hadn't been seen lately. That was not going to work. The police were not stupid. Even their less than perspicacious stalwart, Constable Larkin, wasn't going to be fooled for long.

That's exactly what the terrified Lester thought when the constable phoned him early Wednesday evening.

"There's been a new development in your wife's case, Botts," he said. "I'd like you to come down to the station."

Lester bit his tongue to keep from crying out. A development! Someone saw him coming from the Wombsy farm that night. Or

the vicar talked. Frightened to death, he drove to the station.

Terror slowly gave way to rage as he listened to what the constable had to say. Headquarters had learned that Alice was born in Australia fifty-five years ago, had been married three times, and there was no record of her ever having divorced the third husband, a chap named O'Cullighan.

"Considering this information, Botts," finished the constable, "do you have anything more to say?"

Lester had a hard time answering. Why, that double-faced, lying creature. Lied about her age. And married three times! Why . . .

"Botts, I said do you have anything else to add to what you told me on Sunday?"

Lester found voice, angry voice.

"No, I don't, nothing. Like I told you on Sunday, I went home at eight thirty that Friday, and she was gone. No note, nothing. Now can I go?"

"Go ahead," said Larkin. Lester went, leaving the constable thinking, well, damned if the mama's boy didn't get his back up just there. But if it turns out that him what can't say boo to a goose did away with his wife like headquarters says is possible—well, forget it. Botts a murderer? Can't be.

Tuesday morning the vicar in again for his *Times*, Mrs. Auxley had some more news.

"Myrtle, the constable's wife, old blabbermouth, says that Lester Botts was never legally married to that floozy. Turns out she was married three times in Australia and never divorced the last one. And another thing—"

"Another thing" would have to wait until another time, since an irate old lady was banging the post office counter demanding service. Thus rescued, the vicar took the *Times* off the rack, put his money in the cup, and hurried back to the vicarage.

This, he thought as he sat in the study, will make Lester even angrier at his dead wife, increase his determination not to go to the police. I shall have to try again to reason with him.

The vicar was right. Oh, that horrible, terrible, rotten creature, Lester said over and over that evening. Played for a fool. Claimed to be thirty-eight when she was almost as old as dear, dear Mother. And not even divorced. The whole village must be laughing at me. If she was alive today, I'd kill her, kill her.

The spineless weakling was developing a backbone. He would need it. For next morning, Thursday, December seventeenth, he was fired, canned, shown the door.

"That's right, Botts," the plant manager snarled. "You sent the Kenya shipment to Greece and the Greece shipment to Belize, and if our agent at the dock hadn't spotted it . . . the hell with that. You're through, done, right now."

Horried, Lester begged for another chance.

"No way, no way," the manager roared. "You never really cut the mustard here, Botts, and this foul-up is the last straw. I want you out of here before the shift starts."

There it was, eighteen years of faithful service down the drain; no severance, no pension, not even the customary box of Christmas candy.

He repeated it—spat it—on the way home:

"Never cut the mustard, cut the mustard, cut the mustard. Nobody said I didn't cut the mustard when dear Mother was alive. It's all that vile creature's fault. She has ruined my life."

Over at county police headquarters in Litton Manor there was a temporary lull in serious crime, and Inspector Harrison, a tall, handsome man in his late forties, was given the Missing Person file on one Alice Botts. That was also on Thursday.

"We'll see Reardon first, since he's just around the corner," the inspector told Sergeant Adams,

a veteran on the force. "How many times have we questioned him for one thing or another?"

"More than enough," said Adams. "And we've yet to pin anything on the slippery bastard."

Which was true. Danny Reardon, a muscular fellow in his forties, had been the bane of the police for at least fifteen years. Though he'd been long suspected of fencing stolen property, the police had never been able to get anything on him.

"Now what?" Reardon demanded when the two men entered his store. Harrison replied that a Mrs. Lester Botts of Nether Fenny had been reported missing by her husband.

"And since your truck, Danny, was seen outside the Botts place on the afternoon in question—Friday, December fourth—we're hoping you can provide us with some worthwhile information."

It took a while, Reardon snarling "police harassment" every other word, but what emerged was this:

Mrs. Botts had phoned the day before, saying she wanted a small bookcase, a birthday present for her husband for his *Do It Yourself* books. Reardon had one. He drove out to the Botts place the next day, arriving there around two thirty.

"And I left ten minutes later," he snarled. "That's it, the whole

story. Now beat it. I got work to do."

"Did you leave the bookcase?" Harrison asked calmly.

Nay, he didn't. The woman was half crooked. She started to slobber all over him, saying if he didn't charge for the bookcase she'd make it up to him.

"I told her ta go to hell. I left. Now beat it."

"Mr. Reardon has scruples, sir," said Adams with a straight face.

"Damn right I do. I ain't gonna let no half-drunk old hag claim I attacked her. You'd love that, wouldn't ya?"

It took a while to convince Reardon to come down to headquarters with them and make a signed statement. And then, when he was served a warrant impounding his truck, he stormed from the station fulminating against the persecution of the working class.

As Harrison and Adams were about to head for Nether Fenny to interview Lester (they had learned that he'd been fired the day before), the superintendent stopped them. A call had come from a constable in Least Mereshead, a village to the north. "Appears to be a suicide. An old chap suffering from a debilitating disease, the poor soul. Shouldn't take more than a few days."

*

The vicar saw the item under "Police Blotter" in the Litton Manor paper that evening. A Daniel Reardon, a used furniture dealer, had gone to police headquarters and made a statement in the missing person case of a Mrs. Lester Botts of Nether Fenny.

"Oh my my," moaned the vicar. "An innocent man brought to police headquarters, the inference being he's under suspicion. I can't allow this to continue."

He waited until seven o'clock. Then he phoned Lester, telling him he wanted to talk to him, and asked him to come to the vicarage. By then everyone in the village knew that Reardon's van had been seen at the Botts place on the day Alice disappeared, everyone but Lester. Gossip never made it out to his isolated cottage.

Lester arrived at the vicarage in record time. The vicar, calmly staving off interruptions, explained that one Daniel Reardon, a used furniture dealer, had been taken to police headquarters and questioned about Alice's disappearance.

"Word of mouth, Lester, has it that Reardon's truck was seen at your place on the ah . . . that afternoon."

"Reardon, Danny Reardon," exclaimed Lester. "*Him*, that rotter. But did Alice know him? Wait a minute!" Up he jumped

and went into his crazy dance, yelling, "You mean she was carrying on behind my back with a common criminal?"

That went on for a few moments. Then, the dance over, Lester breathing hard back in the chair, the vicar tried again. He said that Reardon was probably there to sell a piece of furniture. Lester snarled that they didn't need any furniture.

"But, Lester, Reardon is being held up to—well, to public obloquy. Don't you have any compunction about subjecting an innocent man—"

Lester wouldn't have known a compunction from a corkscrew, but he got the drift.

Once more he jumped up and waved and yelled, a sight to remember. Why should he feel sorry for a common thief? A rotter who was "foolin' around with that vile, awful creature behind my back."

Exhausted, he plopped down, on the verge of crying.

"You haven't heard the worst, vicar," he wailed. "I've been canned. I have no job." He jumped up, ran to the door.

"And you keep wanting me to go to the police," he shouted. "I won't, I won't. I'd go mad in prison. I'm going home. Good-bye, vicar. And remember what you promised."

After Lester had gone, the vicar spent a long time agoniz-

ing over the awful problem. Granted Reardon was a miscreant. But he was innocent of the poor woman's death, he thought. And I possess the knowledge that will prove him innocent. Yet I cannot reveal it. It's wrong, all wrong. It defies logic—common sense—that a doctor, a lawyer, a minister of the gospel, can possess vital information—a confession of guilt—but because it came about in a so-called privileged communication it must remain secret, the law prohibits its being revealed.

How many ruthless lawbreakers—even murderers—have confessed to their lawyers that they are guilty but have gone free due to their lawyers' skill? And even worse, how many innocent persons have been convicted of these crimes?

The dear vicar, he was becoming so distraught that he'd even thought of sending an anonymous note to the police. For perhaps the law of confidentiality didn't apply in this situation. Lester had never been a churchgoer. And the visit that Saturday was made purely in the spirit of the holidays, merely to wish Lester and his wife seasonal greetings.

For shame, the vicar upbraided himself. Of course the law applied, senseless though it be. Lester, in a hysterical state, had sought help from a man of God.

And I gave him my solemn word that I would never reveal his confession. I cannot send an anonymous note.

But Mrs. Zebbley did.

On the day following Lester's wild carryings-on at the vicarage, Inspector Harrison and Sergeant Adams, the sad case of the elderly man's suicide cleared up, drove to Nether Fenny. Lester heard the car. He rushed to the window. He squealed. He flung off the apron, the dust cap. He knew the two men getting out of the car were policemen.

He gritted his teeth, implored his dear mother to help him. It was now or never. He had talked himself into standing fast, the revelation that a low-down like Danny Reardon was sharing Alice's charms behind his back (he wondered bitterly if Reardon had to bring a present—a lampshade—every time) being one more proof of what a vile, coarse, wanton creature she was.

The worm, trodden on once too often, stumbled to the door.

An hour and a half later, driving back to headquarters, the inspector asked Adams what he thought.

"Well, if forensics doesn't come up with bloodstains in Reardon's truck, Botts could be our man. But then we have Larkin's description of him. A namby-pamby pipsqueak mother's boy

with about as much backbone as a jellyfish. And he sure struck me as being just that. Seemed scared to death."

"Not unusual. You and I have had a ton of experience with witnesses like Botts. We strike fear into the most innocent of them. And as for namby-pamby murderers, how many have we known?"

"Plenty."

They agreed that they had never seen a neater, cleaner, more sparkling house (it'll sell for a pretty penny, Adams had thought).

"Let's summarize," the inspector said. "We have three possibilities. First, Mrs. Botts left of her own accord taking every single scrap of her clothes, everything, through prearrangement with somebody. Second, Rear-don murdered her when she resisted his advances, packed her and all of her things—to make it look as if she had left on her own—in his van, disposed of everything in some quarry or woods. Now, what's the third, sergeant?"

"The third is Botts, who insists he came home at eight thirty to find her gone. Larkin says rumor has it that she was a spendthrift and Botts a tight-fisted miser. They fought over money. He killed her, buried her somewhere. But there was no evidence of blood in the house or

the car. Still, that doesn't prove he didn't do it."

"Look in the mirror, sergeant," said the inspector. "Is he still following us?"

"Yeah, he's right behind us."

When told he had to go to the station in Litton Manor and give a signed statement, Lester had asked—blubbered—if he could drive his own car. Probably didn't want the villagers to see him in a police car, the inspector thought. He was told he could follow them.

That happened on Saturday, December nineteenth. On Sunday—a blustery, snowy day—there was a good turnout for services. Still no Mrs. Zebbley. The poor woman must have been hard hit, the vicar thought. Constantly worried about Lester, the poor vicar didn't realize until he was back in his study, warming himself before the crackling fire, that he had repeated the sermon of the previous Sunday ("If we confess our sins," et cetera).

Oh my, that explains the titting, the vicar thought. I must get a grip on myself; otherwise I'm going to reveal Lester's confession inadvertently. And . . . oh my, oh my, the worst is yet to come.

It arrived at eight thirty Monday morning, a half hour earlier than usual. The vicar was

shocked by his housekeeper's appearance.

"My goodness, Mrs. Zebley. Why, you're just a shadow of yourself. You shouldn't have come in. I'm doing all right."

Although she looked pale and wan, Mrs. Zebley still cast a rather potent shadow. Mrs. Zebley liked to eat.

"I been put through the wringer, vicar," Mrs. Zebley said. "But one more day stayin' home and I'da been ready for the booby hatch."

Anxious to postpone the dreaded inquisition, the vicar asked if she thought she could handle toast and marmalade, maybe a poached egg.

"That'd hit the spot. But do you think you could make it two eggs and maybe a pinch or two of bacon?"

The vicar was happy to oblige. He rushed about preparing the repast. Mrs. Zebley made short work of it.

"Didn't think I was that hungry," she said. "Now, vicar, before I get goin' there's something I'd like to ask. It's about the Botts goings-on. The papers hain't told much, and the busybodies that kept phoning me didn't know anymore'n I do. Remember that Saturday you went out there to wish them season's greetings? Let's see now, what was that date? Where's the calendar?"

"We don't need the calendar," mumbled the poor vicar. "It was the twelfth."

"That's right, it was. Well, the papers have it that the wifey flew the coop on Friday the fourth. That was over a week before you went out there. What did that poor ninny Botts have to say? How was he taking it? And what about the house? Had he let the housekeeping go? Go ahead, vicar, I'm all ears."

Mrs. Zebley left at noon. It had been a frustrating morning. Not that she had overworked. The vicar had insisted on doing the vacuuming and dusting his many books. All Mrs. Zebley had done was to make a few ineffectual passes with the dustrag every half hour or so.

On the question of what Botts had said on that Saturday, the vicar had stammered and stuttered, hemmed and hawed. Mrs. Zebley finally lost patience.

"Now, vicar, you're doing nothing but beatin' around the bush. You told me ten times that the house was as neat as a pin. I'm getting sick and tired of hearing what a great housekeeper that nitwit is. You know what, vicar? I think you're holding back. You think if you tell me just what happened I'll go blabbing it all over the village. That hurts, vicar, that hurts."

She had him cornered. Extremely agitated, he admitted

that Lester had indeed told him something.

"But, Mrs. Zebley," the poor man begged, "I am duty bound not to reveal what Lester told me. Now, please, please don't ask anything more. And I hope and pray you will not repeat what I have just said about being duty bound. Promise me, please."

For once in her life Mrs. Zebley had been at a loss for words. Her mouth agape, she had stared at the vicar. He was wringing his hands, seemed ready to cry. She got a grip on herself.

"Oh, vicar, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. You know me, old nibnose. And I promise, I cross my heart, not to mention anything about that duty bound. Now I better get to work."

At which the vicar had smiled forlornly.

"You are no nibnose, Mrs. Zebley," the vicar said quite emotionally. "You are a fine human being. But in this situation . . . well . . . I am simply . . . that is . . . perhaps someday I shall be able to explain."

Being called a fine human being took some of the sting out of the frustrating morning. But what about that "duty bound"? What did the vicar mean by that? Botts confessed that he killed his wife? That didn't make sense for two reasons—

one, that chickenheart kill someone? Forget it.

But say he did, accidentally. It was, she thought, the vicar's bounden duty to tell the police that Botts had confessed to murder. But ten to one nobody killed nobody. That giddy floozy just ran off with another man. What woman in her right mind could put up with a skinny, horsefaced, poor-spirited, pennypinching, persnickety ninny like Lester Botts?

Still, there was something going on. The vicar was worried as hell. He had something real big on his mind.

For the rest of the week Mrs. Zebley steered clear of the Botts affair, while the vicar worked on his history in the study.

Christmas came, more snow fell, but there was a good turnout for services. The vicar preached a short sermon: it is the season for rejoicing. But to Mrs. Zebley it sounded like a funeral oration.

With Inspector Harrison and Sergeant Adams and half of the county constabulary hastily dispatched to a sensational manor house murder just outside of Litton Manor, Constable Larkin was ordered to keep his eyes and ears open, nose around, find out anything more he could on the Botts case. Mrs. Zebley ran into the constable at Mrs.

Auxley's place two days after Christmas.

"Anything new?" she asked.

Nothing new. But, the constable said, it was his opinion that the woman had simply cut and run. "You've heard that he lost his job?" he added.

Mrs. Zebley had heard that. She asked if the constable had any idea what Botts planned to do.

"He's got himself a 'For Sale by Owner' sign out at his place. Someone said he's going to Canada when he sells it."

"Hmm," hmed Mrs. Zebley. "Fancy that. What about Rear-don? He's in the clear?"

"Nobody's in the clear, 'specially *that* bloke." No blood-stains had been found in Rear-don's van, but the constable thought he should keep that information to himself.

"Well," said Mrs. Zebley, "perhaps somethin'll turn up."

"Can't come too soon for me. This weather's pure hell on my arthritis."

On the following day, with the vicar off to Litton Manor via bus to attend the annual bishops' conference, Mrs. Zebley had the vicarage to herself. This gave her the opportunity she had been waiting for to find out all she could about "duty bound."

She spent over an hour in the vicar's study. Two dictionaries were of little help. There was

"duty-free" and "duty plate" and "duty mark," no "duty bound."

But "duty" ("something one is expected to do by moral or legal obligation") was there. As was "bound" ("under a legal or moral obligation"). Mrs. Zebley was beginning to figure things out. But she wasn't satisfied. She kept taking down one book after another. She finally came to *Law for the Layman*.

She looked in the index. "Clergymen—see page 43" caught her eye. She read that, her heart beginning to beat faster. She was then directed to page 109—"Privileged relationships and communications."

So that's it, she told herself, outraged. That lily-livered milk-sop somehow went bats, killed his wife, and then—likely bawling his eyes out—confessed to the vicar. It's gotta be that or why would the vicar be in such a state? And because of that what-chamacallit tomfoolery hatched up by a bunch of shyster lawyers the vicar was duty bound not to tell.

Doctors, it said, were in the same boat as ministers and lawyers. The whole thing don't make a bit of sense, she reflected. You can kill someone, tell your lawyer you did it and glad of it, and he can get up in court and claim you're as innocent as a newborn babe. Not guilty, says

the jury. Plumb goofy; nuts; wildest thing I ever heard.

No wonder the poor vicar was half crazy. His conscience was eating him up. That Botts cried to the poor vicar that he'd murdered his wife, and the vicar, a man of God—supposed to keep telling the rest of us to do what's right, listen to your conscience—was then duty bound to keep quiet about it. Hell, that was bounden duty turned upside down.

The poor vicar, gettin' it from all sides. Can't tell the police that Reardon—that good-for-nothing—is innocent, that Botts is the one. And Botts sure as hell begging him not to tell. And there's nibnose me. You can bet the vicar's worried to hell and back about maybe I'll figure it all out and'll blab it all over the village. The poor man. It ain't right.

Not much happened for the next three and a half months. The vicar and Mrs. Zebley went about the vicarage pretending all was well; but there was an underlying tension. And each took care not to mention the Botts affair. Which—the Botts affair—had faded out of village gossip, emphasis avidly shifting to the scandalous goings-on of members of the royal family. Poor Alice Botts was no match for Princess Diana.

Though sorely tempted to discuss the nutty privileged-communications law with her fellow quidnuncs, Mrs. Zebley held her tongue. And it hurt. Inspector Harrison and Sergeant Adams were kept busy trying to clear up a series of major crimes elsewhere in the county. That left the missing person case of Mrs. Botts in the hands of Constable Larkin. He poked around half-heartedly, long since convinced it was a waste of time.

Finally came April, unfairly besmirched by the poet as the cruelest month. It arrived bedecked in blue sky and green grass, yellow dandelions, blue violets, a veritable cornucopia of beguiling nature. Mrs. Zebley sprang into action.

"You're gonna spend three or four hours out in the sun," she told the vicar on a gorgeous morning. "You gotta get your color back. Now, you get your painting stuff together, and you take and bicycle out to the farm and start where you left off last winter. I'll pack a lunch."

The vicar protested that he had a lot of work to do on his history. Mrs. Zebley stood fast. So, a little after ten o'clock, with his lunch, the photo of Millet's *Man with the Hoe*, and his painting equipment all in the handlebar basket, the vicar rode out to the farm.

Passing the Botts cottage

with its 'For Sale by Owner' sign, the poor vicar asked himself, will this terrible problem ever be solved? And how much longer can I endure such innermost agony? It is wrong for me to allow Danny Reardon, miscreant though he be, to continue to be under suspicion. And is it fair to dear Mrs. Zebley to expect her to remain silent, for I am convinced that she has long concluded that Lester confessed to me that he murdered his wife?

When he turned into the narrow dirt road that led from the main road into the abandoned farm, the vicar stopped. Why did I allow Mrs. Zebley to force me to come out here? he thought. But I can't go back now. She'd be hurt, the poor woman.

And it is a lovely day, a perfect day for painting. Still . . . what if the spring rains have uncovered the body? Oh my, what a terrible predicament.

There was no sign of the yellow-haired, double-chinned, Australian pudgy, however. But there were black-throated blue warblers from Scandinavia, yellow tanagers from Spain, and swifts and swallows, natives come home. And the spring flowers!

If I weren't so hopelessly miserable, I'd be bursting for joy, the vicar murmured helplessly.

Mrs. Zebley answered the

phone around two o'clock. It was Myrtle, the constable's wife. Bad news. The vicar had been coming out of the Wombsy farm—musta had his mind somewhere else, wasn't lookin' up the road—when he was hit by a car.

"Thrown forty feet in the air, his bicycle goin' one way, him the other."

Mrs. Zebley let out a strangled cry. She felt faint.

"Is he . . . I mean . . ." she stammered, "is he . . . he . . . alive?"

Barely. He was rushed to St. Margaret's hospital in Litton Manor. He was in a coma. It was touch and go. Mrs. Zebley hurried to the church. She prayed for a good hour while her tears kept flowing. When she started for home, there were still twenty other women in the church, all praying for their beloved vicar.

Mrs. Zebley didn't sleep well that night. As early as possible she phoned the hospital. There was no change; the vicar was still in a coma. After breakfast she went to the church again. Then, constantly sobbing, she opened the vicarage—she had a key—and made a gallant but futile effort to go about her duties.

Constable Larkin, long of face, appeared.

"It's the things what was in the bicycle basket," he said. "Looks like he was about half done with the painting."

"The person who hit the vicar—" she asked "—was it his fault?"

"It were a her, the county nurse. But it weren't her fault. There was a fellow in a van following her. Both of them said the vicar just came pedaling out of the Wombsy farm road lookin' neither up nor down. Poor man; he musta had his mind in the clouds."

"Maybe" was all Mrs. Zebley could manage. But she knew better. The vicar's mind had been deep in misery ever since December.

"The bicycle's all beat up," the constable said. "Well, I best be going. It's a sad day for the village, Mrs. Zebley. A sad day."

After the constable had left, Mrs. Zebley began putting away the painting items. But first she unrolled the vicar's partly completed painting of the *Man with the Hoe*, just to see how much he had done.

Something caught her eye. Wait a minute, she said to herself, what's that? She put the painting on the kitchen table and placed four cups on the corners to keep it flat. Then she put the photograph beside it. She studied them intently.

"I better get vicar's big magnifying glass," she said. She hurried into the study, came back with the glass the vicar used to

help him decipher crinkly old hand-written manuscripts.

Bent over the table, becoming more and more excited, she scrutinized the photo of Millet's original, then the vicar's painting. Of course the man with the hoe was in each, digging in the dirt. But in Millet's picture the man was bareheaded. In the vicar's the man wore a cap. And there was no barn in Millet's painting, but there was a barn in the vicar's. "Eeekk," Mrs. Zebley exclaimed. "It just came out, all by itself." Mrs. Zebley had seen that weatherbeaten barn many times when she and the family used to picnic on the Wombsy farm.

"My God," she gasped as she hurriedly sat down. "My God, the vicar's man has got on that goofy cap with the ear flaps that Botts wears winter and summer. My God, the poor man. Think what he's been going through, the poor dear man."

If Sigmund Freud had been there, he would have joyfully explained it to the stunned Mrs. Zebley in such incomprehensible language as anticathexis at work, the superego asserting itself, an unconscious discharge of instinctual energy.

Mrs. Zebley put it to herself in simpler terms.

"It were his conscience takin' over," she murmured, shaking her grey head. "It were guidin'

his hand. He didn't know what he was painting. Think what that poor man's been a-sufferin'. Damn that Lester Botts. To think that a useless, persnickety, backsliding jellyfish like that can cause a fine human being like the vicar all this misery. It just hain't right. And I'm gonna do somethin' about it."

The first thing she did was burn the vicar's painting.

"Not that he's got sense enough to figure it out," she told herself, referring to the constable, "but he might come wantin' it for evidence."

Then at home that afternoon she spent fruitless hours trying to figure out how she could safely notify the police without involving the vicar. She was afraid that when the vicar came out of his coma—and please, God, let him—he might remember that he had painted Botts digging on the farm. There's gotta be some way, she kept thinking. But she couldn't think of any.

She phoned St. Margaret's three times that day. The news wasn't good. The vicar was still in intensive care, still in a coma.

Lester learned of the accident around four o'clock. He had gone to the post office to see if there was any mail from Canada. Mrs. Auxley said there was something from Alberta.

"I guess you heard about the poor vicar," she said.

"The . . . the . . . vicar?" squeaked Lester.

Oh, what a noodle, thought Mrs. Auxley. No wonder that woman cut and run.

"He's in St. Margaret's, in a coma. It don't look good. He was coming from that old Wombsy place on his bicycle and got hit. Knocked hell for leather."

Lester's mouth fell open, nothing came out.

"What's the matter? You havin' a fit?" demanded Mrs. Auxley.

"Ah . . . I'm . . . no . . . I'm all right," Lester stuttered as he stumbled to the door.

It's the likes of him, Mrs. Auxley told herself sorrowfully, that's brought the country to the state it's in.

The moment he reached home, Lester grabbed the phone book and called a house agency. He had a fine house for sale. He wanted a quick sale. Send someone out right away. He was told he would have to wait until the next morning.

Lester, who wouldn't have been able to express it in those words; had begun to think that he had tempted fate too long. He had spent many hours worrying about the spring rains' uncovering Alice. And now the vicar had gone out there; what had he found? And don't people sometimes say things in a coma? That's what the vicar will do.

Oh, what a terrible, terrible life I have had since I met that lying creature.

Mrs. Jacobs, a mature, no-nonsense house agent, came out early next morning. Lester showed her around. She was impressed with the sparkling little house, the neat flower garden out front, the well-cared for vegetable garden in back. But she told Lester he'd better come down to earth.

"Now, Mr. Botts, the price you're asking is totally unrealistic. Yes, this is a nice house, and yes, it sparkles. But it's only five rooms, too small for a couple. It might do well for a retired spinster."

It was indeed the perfect place for the retired librarian for whom Mrs. Jacobs had been trying to find a nice small house in a quiet village. She'll love this, Mrs. Jacobs told herself.

There followed a long discussion. Lester came down in price, one whimper at a time. He finally agreed to what the agent said was a reasonable price.

Lester Botts, a profound ignoramus, had made a perspicacious prognostication. The vicar was indeed beginning to talk in his coma.

Mrs. Zebley had phoned St. Margaret's every day. A week after the accident she was given permission to visit the vicar,

even though he was still unconscious. She took the early bus to Litton Manor and entered the intensive care waiting room at St. Margaret's half an hour ahead of time.

A volunteer—a hearty, buxom, chatty woman—was in charge. A neatly dressed woman of about fifty was also sitting there, dabbing her eyes. She got up to leave as Mrs. Zebley came in.

"Thank you for your coffee and cookies, Mrs. Wallace," she said, her voice quite shaky. "You've been very kind."

"You're welcome, dearie. Now, as I told you, you have to stop thinking what you've been thinking. The poor man doesn't mean you. Like I said, he's a man of God, and it's all this talk about bringing back capital punishment that made the poor soul whisper what he did. People in comas are likely to say anything."

"I hope you're right," the woman managed to say as she left.

An inveterate nosy Parker like Mrs. Zebley couldn't let that go by.

"Not being nosy," she said, being nosy, "she seemed broken up. A relative not doing well?"

"Well," said the volunteer, "about a week ago she was driving near the village of Nether Fenny when the village vicar

came out on his bicycle from a side road. The poor nurse couldn't stop and ran over him. Now she's all conscience-stricken. You see, the vicar's in a coma, but the nurse in intensive care told me that the poor man has whispered, 'Thou shalt not kill,' once or twice a day. May I ask whom you wish to see?"

Mrs. Zebley introduced herself, said that she was the housekeeper of the vicar in intensive care.

"Oh yes," the volunteer said, consulting a desk pad. "You're to see the vicar. Oh, I wish I had known who you were. You could have talked to Miss Francis, the nurse."

"Did she see the vicar?"

"No one has been allowed to see him. It was the intensive care nurse who told Miss Francis about the vicar whispering, 'Thou shalt not kill.' I'll call intensive care."

She picked up the phone, said that the vicar's housekeeper, who had been given permission to see him, was here. Could she go in?

"It's through that door there, Mrs. Zebley," said the volunteer as she put down the phone. "Helen, the nurse in charge, will meet you."

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Zebley was in the Litton Manor mall, three short blocks from the

hospital. She was mad, spittin' mad.

"The poor vicar, lying there with all them tubes stickin' in him, a pitiful sight. And all the fault of that mealy-mouthed nitwit. That idiot's got half the county conscience-stricken. That poor nurse. The vicar mumbling in his coma. Well, I say that's enough."

Mrs. Zebley had been allowed to see the vicar for only five minutes. She had tried to keep back the tears, failed. Just before she left, she managed to talk to the nurse.

"How . . . how is . . . I mean," she asked, "is there any hope?"

"Yes, yes, we're all so happy. He's turned the corner. The doctors are more optimistic every day."

But to Mrs. Zebley it looked hopeless.

She then asked Helen if the vicar had really whispered, "Thou shalt not kill."

That upset the nurse. She said that she had talked to Miss Francis in the waiting room and Miss Francis had asked if the vicar had said anything.

"And bigmouth me," the nurse told Mrs. Zebley. "Didn't I tell her about him whispering that. It upset her. Now I don't want to say any more about it, Mrs. Zebley."

Mrs. Zebley understood. She thanked Helen, thanked the vol-

unteer, headed straight for the mall.

She bought some cheap stationery, dug a pen out of her handbag, and in a firm hand printed:

Lester Botts killed his wife. He buried her on the old Wombsy farm. It's just north of Nether Fenny. This is no pipedream.

She addressed it to the Chief Constable of the County, Police Headquarters, Litton Manor, bought a stamp at the branch office, mailed the note.

"Well, what do you think, superintendent?" the chief constable asked the next day. The four men—the chief constable, the superintendent, Inspector Harrison, Sergeant Adams—were in the superintendent's office. Mrs. Zebley's note had been passed around.

"Who knows, sir," the superintendent said. "Might be a crank. Might be the real thing. In any case we have to act on it. Let's get some digging equipment out there and see what we unearth."

Driving by the farm two days later, Lester heard the loud bark of the diesel engine in the backhoe, digging away. He nearly drove off the road. He raced home. He got on the phone. He demanded to talk to Mrs. Jacobs, the house agent, right away. He was told that she was

out but would call him back within the hour.

She called back in half an hour. Lester started to babble, now and then making a little sense. Mrs. Jacobs finally understood. Why hadn't she sold his house yet?

"Wait a minute, Mr. Botts. Take it easy. I have sold your house. Received a substantial down payment this very morning."

"Well, hurry up. Get the money to me. I have to go to Canada . . . a . . . a . . . sick relative."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Botts, but the closing won't be for three weeks."

Lester squealed. Didn't do him any good. Wow, said Mrs. Jacobs when she hung up. I've had some weird ones, but he tops them all.

Lester spent another horrible night. It was the vicar's fault. It had to be him. Nobody else knew. Maybe he didn't mean to. Maybe he only talked in his coma. But still he talked. What a rotten world. You can't trust anyone.

But he must act, right away. They'll find Alice long before the three weeks are up, he thought. That would mean jail. I'd go crazy there. But what can I do, what can I do? he moaned all that day.

Another miserable night. But by morning he had made up his

mind to leave. Mrs. Jacobs could send the papers to Canada. He rushed around madly. Hurried to Litton Manor, withdrew his money, still a substantial sum in spite of Alice's wild spending. By three o'clock he had finished packing his few clothes in two battered suitcases, determined to leave within the hour for Birmingham, stay overnight, abandon his car—temporarily—at the airport, take a plane to Canada. He planned to write a note to Mrs. Jacobs at the airport, begging her to sell the car and the furniture.

Finally he sat down in a chair, looking around the dear little house. Why did it have to turn out like this? he sobbed. Would things have been different if Mother had only said a kind word to me once in a while?

"Everything I did, Mother," the poor man sobbed, "I did to please you, but . . ."

He was interrupted by a loud knock; a stern, peremptory, authoritarian knock.

"Open up, Botts," came the command. "We know you're in there."

Suddenly all sobbed out, Lester let out a little giggle. He pushed himself from the chair and staggered to the door, still giggling.

"We've found your wife's body, Botts," said Inspector Harrison. "We're arresting you for her

murder. I warn you that anything you say may be used against you. I advise you to hire a solicitor as soon as we get to headquarters."

From then on, Lester was in a daze, a lost soul, so lost that he agreed to hiring a solicitor. The trial was short, the jury agreeing with the solicitor that the crime was unpremeditated, there was no malice aforethought.

His Honor pronounced the sentence in a solemn voice: six years in the new first offenders' prison at Foolsbridge. Lester was led away, whimpering pathetically.

The vicar was released from St. Margaret's in late May. He spent seven weeks in a rehabilitation center in Litton Manor. Constable Larkin brought him home on a lovely day in early August. Mrs. Zebley, with the help of other ladies of the parish, had everything ready. The church sparkled. The vicarage sparkled. Even the old cemetery had been weeded, flowers planted, headstones cleaned.

A privileged group awaited him inside the vicarage, Mrs. Zebley in command. Her hair done, all decked out in a brand-new outfit from the Larger Ladies Discount Store in the mall, she glowed. And the minister who had been coming over

every Sunday from Litton Manor glowed, happy to be turning over his duties to the vicar.

The county nurse, Miss Francis, quite attractive in a blue summer dress, was there.

"Oh, vicar, I'm so happy to see you, so happy," she said. "I've never forgiven myself for having hit your bicycle that day. Can you ever forgive me?"

Beaming beatifically—some of the pink color of old back in his chubby face—the vicar assured Miss Francis that it wasn't her fault.

"I was totally to blame, totally, and I am deeply sorry for having caused you to worry. As you can see, I'm none the worse for wear."

Miss Francis glowed.

Mrs. Zebley introduced the vicar to a handsome little grey-haired woman wearing a chic summer suit. She was a Miss Bentley, a retired librarian.

"Miss Bentley's the one who bought the Botts place," Mrs. Zebley said. "She's started our own Nether Fenny library in the storeroom behind the post office. It's to be a branch of the county library. Now we won't have to depend on the bookmobile."

Mrs. Zebley wasn't aware of it, but she was an ardent bibliophile. She devoured paperback romance novels, the steamier the better.

Miss Bentley glowed. Every-

one glowed. It was just a great, happy, wonderful day.

And in the warden's residence—a rambling twelve room house outside the gates of Foolsbridge prison—trusty Lester Botts glowed. The warden's sixty-three-year-old wife had just complimented him for the sixth or seventh time that week. This time it was for the windows (there were twenty-eight).

"They positively glow, Lester," she gushed—she meant it. "They have never, never been as clean and shiny. You are a gem, Lester, a genuine gem."

Lester was so deliriously happy that he nearly cried. Instead, he glowed.

The joyful gathering inside the vicarage broke up after an hour. Before Mrs. Zebley left, the vicar thanked her for having arranged the homecoming. Mrs. Zebley glowed. Then the vicar, as if suddenly thinking of something, asked if she knew where the *Man with the Hoe* was, the painting he had been working on that fateful day. Mrs. Zebley was ready for that.

"Oh, that," she said, as if dismissing it. "It was a holy mess. All splattered with paint and dirt. It was ruined. I threw it away. Was that all right?"

The vicar assured her that it was indeed all right.

"I'm sure it bore no resem-

blance to the original," he said. Mrs. Zebley took a deep breath, said nothing.

Summer passed. By the time the leaves changed, the vicar had long since completed a new painting of the *Man with the Hoe* and had begun his own landscapes. Studying his painting, Mrs. Zebley told herself that he'd gotten it right this time. Showed his conscience was finally clear.

And her conscience was clear. Beginning with the scantiest of clues—the vicar's agonizing assertion that he was "duty bound" not to reveal what Botts had told him, Mrs. Zebley had solved the case, and in doing so she had lifted a terrible burden from the vicar's conscience.

And she had kept her mouth shut, knowing that one loose word—mention of the goofy ear flaps on the man in the vicar's painting, for instance—would have gotten back to him, caused him to realize that he had unconsciously violated a privileged communication.

So Mrs. Zebley said nothing—and it broke her stout heart—while the village busybodies babbled back and forth as to who had written the anonymous note. (The prosecution had mentioned the note, but its contents had not been revealed.)

The vicar had also wondered

who had written the note. It couldn't have been Mrs. Zebley—she couldn't have known where the poor woman was buried.

The vicar himself had come very close to writing an anonymous note. He had spent three emotional hours on the farm that day in April. He had painted something, but he was pretty sure it wasn't anything he would have been proud of. For, he kept thinking, there in that ditch, a mere forty feet from me, lies buried one of God's creatures. Yes, a hapless creature—a messy, lying, boozy spendthrift, but still one of God's children. Somewhere along the line the poor woman went astray—maybe no one ever really loved her, never told her that she was a nice person. No matter, it was wrong to kill her. Wrong.

Finally the vicar could stand it no longer. He hastily packed and jumped on his bicycle, determined to hurry back to the vicarage and write an anonymous note to the police. For it was terrible enough that Lester had, intentionally or otherwise, violated a commandment of the Lord—Thou shalt not kill—but an innocent person, a reprehensible rascal but innocent, was still under suspicion.

Fate in the person of poor Miss Francis had intervened,

prevented the vicar from violating his sacred pledge.

Often during his rehabilitation he kept thinking, what if the accident hadn't happened. But even though it had, he thought, I am as guilty as if I *had* written a note. He resolved to visit Lester in prison to confess that he'd betrayed him.

Once back in his beloved vicarage, however, he kept postponing the visit, one part of his conscience saying, for God's sake, man, let well enough alone. But then there was the other part: you did wrong—planned to do wrong; you must pay the penalty.

So in late October he went up to Foolsbridge prison. Naturally Mrs. Zebley found out. The taxi driver who had driven him to the prison was a nephew of one of the village's nosy Parkers. Word got around.

The next day, choosing her words carefully, Mrs. Zebley inquired very offhandedly, "Hear you went up to Foolsbridge, vicar. And how's his nibs doing behind the bars?"

My goodness, thought the vicar, there are few secrets in Nether Fenny. Lester, he told Mrs. Zebley, was doing fine, just fine.

"Huh? How come?"

The vicar explained that when a prisoner arrives at Foolsbridge he immediately fills out a ques-

tionnaire. He lists his hobbies, his talents, his hopes for the future.

"It's designed to rehabilitate," the vicar said. "To help the inmate become a productive member of society once he has served his term. Lester stated that he was a handyman, liked housekeeping. And, Mrs. Zebley, as luck would have it, the trusty who had been assisting Mrs. Evans, the warden's wife, in caring for the warden's residence—a commodious house outside the prison gates—had been paroled that very day."

"Lemme guess," groaned poor Mrs. Zebley. "Botts got the job, right?"

"Yes, isn't life amazing? He has his own little apartment above the garage, outside the gates. And you should hear the wife praising him. She says he's an absolute jewel. And Lester is a changed man. He has gained weight. His face has filled out. He stands straight. And do you remember that peculiar old cap, the one with the ear flaps that he wore most of the time?"

"The . . . the cap? Oh, now that you mention it, I kinda remember it. Why?"

"He has discarded it. It apparently represented the old forlorn Lester. He now wears a jaunty, rakish cap with a little red feather—an indication that he has undergone an amazing

transformation. And he attributes it to Mrs. Evans. She is the mother the poor man always desperately yearned for but never had. Someone to praise him, to give him a sense of pride."

"Hmm," hummed Mrs. Zebley snappishly. "And what might the warden think of his wife's jewel?"

"He thinks Lester is far and away the best trusty the prison has ever had." In fact, the warden had told the vicar that he, his wife, and Lester planned to buy an inn in about three years and go into the bed and breakfast business, perhaps in Cornwall.

"The warden is due to retire then," went on the vicar. "And Lester will be eligible for parole around that time. Isn't it ironic, Mrs. Zebley, that by going to prison—something the poor man was in terror of—he has at long last found his niche in life? But it troubles me sorely."

Mrs. Zebley, on the verge of snarling that if Margaret Thatcher were still running the country Botts's niche would be a rockpile, bit her lip, asked, "How come it troubles you? Here's a wishy-washy weakling, nothing but a poor excuse for a man, who's hit the jackpot. What's wrong with that?" she finished, almost spitting it out.

"We must not forget that a terrible tragedy is responsible

for Lester's . . . his . . . well, his metamorphosis."

"That's exactly what I'm thinking. Botts murders his wife, buries her in a ditch, ends up in clover. Say what you will, vicar, there just hain't no justice in this lousy world."

"Yes, it does seem that way at times. But I continue to believe that there is a method behind such seemingly inexplicable happenings and that it will all be explained to us when we attain the heavenly realm."

Mrs. Zebley let that go by. She had her doubts about the heavenly realm. Would they expect her to keep on doing the housecleaning? For all eternity?

Quite casually she asked, "Did you and Botts talk about the note? Remember, it came out in the trial that someone had sent the police an anonymous note?"

That was extremely dicey territory for Mrs. Zebley (and, although she didn't know it, also for the vicar). But since curiosity was one of her most treasured traits, she just had to find out if there was anything new on the note.

The vicar and Lester had talked about the note. In fact, before the contrite vicar could confess that he had planned to write an anonymous note, Lester had impulsively grabbed the vicar's hand and thanked him for having done so. But the vicar

had hastened to explain that it wasn't he who had written it. And since things seemed to have worked out splendidly for Lester, the vicar, not without a twinge of conscience, refrained from telling him that he had planned to write a note.

"Vicar," said Mrs. Zebley sharply, "I said, did you and Botts talk about that anonymous note?"

"Oh yes, yes, we did," the vicar responded hurriedly. "And we agreed that . . . that . . . that someone in a passing car must have seen Lester's car either going in or coming out of the Womby farm on that December night and . . ."

"Finally put two and two together, eh?" suggested Mrs. Zebley.

"Yes," said the vicar quickly. "Now there's one more thing I have to mention before you begin work." (The poor vicar, he had unconsciously emphasized the word work. Here again Freud would have prattled on about the superego taking over, and he would have been right. For the dear, kind vicar would never intentionally hurt dear Mrs. Zebley.)

"Go ahead, I'm all ears," said Mrs. Zebley huffily, the unconscious emphasis on work not lost on her.

"What I am about to tell you, Mrs. Zebley, demonstrates what

an enormous impact Lester's . . . ah . . . well, his rebirth, his newly found life has had on him. He told me that his conscience has been bothering him. He cannot forget that he did commit a brutal crime, even though probably . . ."

"Get to the point, vicar," snapped Mrs. Zebley. "After all, I have *work* to do."

At which point the vicar's round, pink countenance turned a deeper pink.

"I'm sorry. To the point. Lester has asked me to form a committee of villagers to decide how they want to spend a sum of two thousand pounds, a donation from him. It seems he received a very good price for his house."

Mrs. Zebley's mouth fell open. It stayed that way for a moment or two. Then she managed to say something.

"Him . . . Botts . . . that . . . that . . . that pennypinchin' skinflint miser? Two thousand pounds? My God . . . oh, I'm sorry, vicar. I didn't mean that. It's just that . . . well, like the fellow says, words fail me."

The vicar, his cherubic face back to its normal, happy pink, smiled.

"I understand. It is an astonishing development. And there's another one. Lester has also asked me to see if I can discover who wrote the anonymous note to the police. As you recall, Mrs.

Zebbley, while the note was mentioned several times during the trial, its contents were kept secret. Lester feels duty bound—"the vicar stopped suddenly, Mrs. Zebbley flinched, the vicar hurried on—"—that is, he feels he should reward that person. For, after all, that person is directly responsible for what can only be called a much more felicitous life than the poor man's ever had. Imagine, Mrs. Zebbley, he is actually anxious to reward the person who was instrumental in sending him to prison. This is the man with such a horror of prison."

Mrs. Zebbley had been about to push herself up from the chair, begin her duties. But she just sat there. She felt like crying, or swearing, or both.

"How much does his nibs have in mind?" she managed to ask.

"He said he would gladly pay five hundred pounds. I think he actually has a double motive. Granted his conscience is bothering him, but I'm sure he is curious as to how the notewriter knew where the poor woman was buried."

"Probably a lucky guess," Mrs. Zebbley said bitterly. She knew better. Then . . . wait a minute, wait a minute, think what five hundred pounds could do for the Zebbley family. Twin beds; she'd no longer have to share the old wreck with her slobbering, snor-

ing old man. Or what about the front room furniture? It was at least ten years overdue at the garbage dump. Calm outside, churning inside, she said, "Just how do you figure you're gonna find out who wrote it? Once word gets around, every Tom, Dick, and Harry'll put in their claim."

"I've thought of that. An advertisement in the paper, which is what I have in mind, will indeed generate an overwhelming response. But remember, only the police know the note's exact words. That is, only the person who actually wrote it will be able to prove authorship."

While the vicar was talking, Mrs. Zebbley was thinking. She couldn't claim the money herself. That would ruin everything, for she simply would not be able to explain to the vicar how she knew where the body was buried.

Suddenly she had a wonderful thought. She had five or six hardup friends, any one of whom would jump at the chance of getting a hundred-pound windfall. Hey, they'd jump at fifty pounds. She could tell the one she trusted most exactly what was in the note.

No, it was not to be. The vicar went on to say that the police had a fine set of fingerprints from the note.

"Would it be presumptuous of

me, Mrs. Zebley," he continued, "to ask if you would mind spreading the word around the village about the fingerprints? That'll give anyone second thoughts who might be inclined to claim authorship falsely."

"You can count on me, vicar," Mrs. Zebley said, sounding as if she was on the way to the gallops. "Now I better get to *work*." She got up, flounced into the study. Dear me, thought the vicar, I've hurt her feelings.

Late that night, anchored as far on her side of the bed as possible, listening to her snoring husband, the poor woman, having cried her eyes out at having lost the five hundred pounds—a fortune to her—finally told herself, I'm not gonna get any credit, but I'm damn proud of what I did. Look at the vicar now, his cheeks pink again, eating well,

his painting going great, him happy as the day is long. But maybe in that there Judgment Day book up in the vicar's heavenly realm, whoever's keeping the record has gotta give me a good mark. I might not have to do windows when my time comes.

And the vicar was proud of having lived by the words his dear mother so often told the family: "Let your conscience be your guide." Granted, he hadn't actually gone to the police, but he would have written the note if the accident hadn't happened. And if a similar situation ever arose again, in which an innocent person was falsely accused, he would act more promptly, undeterred by the man-made law of the church and the legal profession. Right is right, no matter who says differently.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

FBI Chief Rawson closed his office door and took his seat behind his desk. He faced the two agents. "You recall Vincent Vinelli, who testified against the Mafia?"

"Sure," replied Agent Tim Thompson. "We put him in our Witness Relocation Program where he'd be safe."

"Well, he's not safe now," said Rawson. "He and his wife evidently spooked. They left that address. Not a word to us about it."

"Pretty stupid move," said Agent Sam Sutherland. "Any idea where he is now? Or what name he's using?"

"I just had a call from Kathy, our reliable informer. She says that Vinelli and his wife are living under assumed names in the same apartment house as she and her husband. Not only that, she spotted a Mafia hit man moving into the very same building. It's the Athena Palace, an apartment house on Tenth Avenue."

"Sam and I will get out there right away and question her."

"Be careful," cautioned the chief. "We don't want her identified publicly as our informant. And we don't want to scare off Vinelli or the hit man. Just find out what you can about the layout."

The Athena Palace was eight stories high with two apartments on each floor, one in the west wing and one in the east. Two elevator shafts occupied the space between the wings. One couple lived in each apartment. Posing as electrical inspectors, the two FBI agents discovered that:

(1) Sixteen different colors of paint were used in the apartments, but in no apartment is the bedroom the same color as the living room. Each of the sixteen bedrooms is a different color; each of the sixteen living rooms is a different color. On the fifth floor, the tan bedroom is in one wing and the tan living room is in the other. On another floor, the pearl gray living room is in one wing and the pearl gray bedroom is in the other. On no other floor is a bedroom and a living room the same color.

(2) In the west wing, the man with the teal blue bedroom is just below Edward and just above the man with the white living room, who is just above Celia's husband; these four men include Mr. Ashley, Mr. Darby, Mr. Jones, and Mr. Moore. In the east wing, Ivan's wife is just below the lady with the pink living room and just above Olive, who is just above the lady with the teal blue living room, who in turn is just above the one with the brick red bedroom; these five wives include Mrs. Cosley, Mrs. Fuller, Mrs. Holter, Mrs. Larson, and Mrs. Nilson.

(3) In the west wing, Alex lives just below the man with the eggshell bedroom and just above the one with the cerise living room, who is just above Kathy's husband; these men include Mr. Banks, Mr. Kilmer, and Mr. Moore. Claude is on the same floor as the man with the eggshell bedroom; Alex is on the same floor as the man with the white bedroom; and the man with the cerise living room is on the same floor as Norman. In the east wing, Helen is just below the wife with the eggshell living room and just above Mel's wife, who is just above the wife with the pea green bedroom; these women include Mrs. Fuller, Mrs. Nilson, and Mrs. Larson. One of them is married to Bart; none of them is married to Dan. The man with the eggshell living room is on the same floor as Henry; the wife with the pea green bedroom is on the same floor as Gigi; and Mel is on the same floor as the man with the peach bedroom.

(4) On the odd-numbered floors, no room is orange or russet. On the even-numbered floors, no room is pearl gray, tan, or teal blue. On the sixth floor, none of the rooms is ochre or peach.

(5) The carmine living room and the carmine bedroom are on adjacent floors. The pea green bedroom and pea green living room are in opposite wings.

(6) In one wing, the lady with the cerise bedroom is more than one floor below Maria and just above the lady with the russet living room; they are married to Larry, Oscar, and Peter. In the opposite wing, the lady with the azure living room is just below the one with the pink bedroom and more than one floor above Nell; their husbands include Floyd, George, and John. The lady with the pink bedroom is on the same floor as Julia; neither is married to Mr. Ashley or Mr. Inman.

(7) Karl is on the same floor as Paula's husband; on the floor immediately below live Peter and Ida's husband; one of these four men is Mr. Holter. Floyd is on the same floor as Doris's husband, Oscar is on the same floor as the man with the pearl gray bedroom,

who is not Mr. Nilson. The man with the azure bedroom is in the same wing and just above the one with the brick red living room; he is on the same floor as Ellen's husband.

(8) The lady with the yellow bedroom is on the floor above but in the opposite wing from Maria, who is not Mrs. Jones. Louise is on the floor just below the lady with the orange bedroom and on the floor just above Betty, although not all three are in the same wing.

(9) The man with the carmine living room is in the opposite wing and two floors below the man with the russet bedroom. The pea green bedroom and the peach living room are on the same floor but in different wings. The lady with the yellow living room, who is not on the top floor, is in the same wing as and somewhere above Angela.

(10) George is not on the same floor as the azure bedroom.

(11) No husband and wife have the same initials for their first or last names. One wife is named Flora.

(12) Mr. Enders lives in the west wing. Mr. Parsons lives in the east wing more than one floor above Mr. O'Hara. Mr. Gelman lives one floor below and in the opposite wing from Mr. Fuller.

Agent Thompson told Kathy, "All right, ma'am, we now know the locations of the carmine and pea green living rooms. Which belongs to the hit man and which to Vinelli under his assumed name?" But Kathy, afraid of reprisals, refused to tell them.

The next night, however, she called them on their car phone. "Come quick," she said hurriedly. "I just spotted the hit man in the hall as I was visiting a friend. He had a gun sticking out from under his jacket, and he punched the UP button on the elevator."

"Time for action, Tim," said Sutherland, wheeling the car into a U-turn and speeding to the Athena Palace apartment house.

Kathy met them at the door. "Hurry!" she said. As they rushed for the elevator, she shouted, "Don't forget I'm due a reward!"

The two FBI agents burst in at the door. The hit man turned from his intended victim, pistol in hand. Both agents fired simultaneously, and the hit man clutched his shattered arm and collapsed.

Who was the foiled hit man? Under what name was the witness Vinelli hiding out? What is Kathy's last name? And which apartments do they occupy?

See page 131 for the solution to the March puzzle.

FICTION

BUSH LEAGUER

Doug Allyn



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/97

“How’d the press conference go?” Scotty asked.

“Like a dream,” I said, slumping into the battered chair behind the cheap metal desk. “The one where I’m pitching to Mantle in Yankee Stadium, only I’m throwing volleyballs and I don’t have any pants on.”

“Oh, that dream,” Scotty said, grinning. He was a stub of an Irishman, bowlegs, red hair, permanent sunburn. He’d been a backup catcher for the Cubs for a few seasons. He was a pretty good assistant manager now, or so I’d been told.

“They kept asking me the same damned question from different angles,” I griped. “‘How do you like being back in the bush leagues, Mr. Kenyon? How does it feel to be washed up at thirty-two?’”

“Is that what they asked? Or just what you heard?”

“That’s how it is,” I snapped. “I pitched here at Milan when I was a rookie comin’ up, and after ten years in the majors I’m back. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to have a shot at managing, even if it’s only a double-A club, but I don’t plan to make a damned career of it. How long have you been with the Milers, Scott?”

“Six years,” Scotty said with a shrug. “I’ve got a family, kids in school. Guys like you go where

the game takes ’em. Me, I’m happy where I am.”

“I won’t be here long enough to like it. This town was just a stop on my way to the majors the last time, and that’s all it is to me now. Any problem with that?”

“No, sir, Mr. Kenyon, sir,” Scott said easily. “I always get along with managers. Win or lose, they never stay long.”

“That’s a comfort. What’s my agenda for the rest of the day?”

“Not much,” Scott said, sliding a manila folder across his desk. “The players don’t report till next week, so you’ve got time to get settled in. These pictures are from the shoot you did with the Milan Little League All-Stars yesterday. They’d like you to autograph ’em.”

“I usually get ten bucks a pop for autographs.”

“Sorry, but around here we do ’em for free,” Scott said. “Welcome to the bush leagues, Mr. Kenyon. Sir.”

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to get a rise out of me or not. Screw him. I pulled the stack of eight by ten glossies to me, scrounged a felt-tipped pen from the desk drawer, and started signing. “Good luck, Calvin Kenyon.” Scott was eyeing me oddly. “What is it?”

“Did you notice anything unusual about that fourth shot?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding, Scot-

ty, I've signed a million of these."

"Not like that one. Check it out."

I glanced at the photo, irritated. A shot of me with my arm around some kid. Whoopee. I started to toss it back on the pile, then hesitated. The kid was a blond, scrawny little beanpole with a gap in his front teeth. And Scott was right. There was something vaguely familiar about him.

I checked the name printed neatly on the back. Donnie Valerio. Parents: Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Valerio and a street address. Didn't recognize the name. "Should I know this kid?"

"I don't know," Scott said, still watching me. "I thought the name sounded familiar, but that's not what caught my eye. He looks one helluva lot like you. Or didn't you notice?"

"Get outa here." I tossed the photo on the pile. "You've been smokin' Astroturf."

"C'mon, you saw something there, too. I do some amateur photography myself, and I've got a fair eye. The kid's ten. You got any ex-wives or kids hangin' around?"

"Two ex-wives: a New York model and a wannabe rock singer. Neither of 'em wanted to mess up their figures by havin' kids. Didn't mind messin' up the figures on my paycheck when

they split, though. Now I've got no wives, no kids, no time for 'em. That's the difference between guys who make the bigs and guys who stay in the bush leagues, Scotty. You learn to focus on what's important. Know what that is? Your next pitch. Not the game, not the fans, not even your family. Only the next pitch. You want to make it in this life, you focus on what's important."

"Yes, sir," Scott said. "I couldn't agree more."

What's important. Right. I called it a day at two and went home. To the Milan Holiday Inn. My suitcase was on the dresser, still packed. I'd have to find an apartment soon. Even if my game plan came off without a hitch I'd be stuck in this town for a season. A year. Jesus. I'd been here two days. It already felt like a year.

I shucked my jacket, tossed it on one of the double beds, flopped on the other, and laced my hands behind my neck.

What's important? For openers I had to find a way to turn the Milers into a winning team. It wouldn't be easy. Half of them were rookies who'd probably never make the bigtime, and the others were hasbeens on a downhill slide out of the game.

Like me? No. No way. Milan

was temporary. The same as the last time. I'd coach here for a year, then snag an offer to move back to the bigs. It would happen. It had to. . . .

I woke with a start two hours later, dazed, sweating, unsure where I was. Holiday Inn. Milan. Bush league. Damn.

"I'm pregnant, Cal," Tammy said.

Her voice seemed so real I almost glanced around the room. A dream. Sweet Jesus, just a dream. The country girl. Bumpkin, I called her. Tammy . . . what the hell was her last name? Kowalski. Tammy Kowalski. Ten years ago? Eleven? We'd been going together six months or so when the Detroit Tigers called me up to pitch in the majors.

Then Tammy turned up pregnant. Or said she was. Trying for a ring, my buds said. If so, it didn't work. I was on my way to the bigtime. A wife and a kid weren't on the agenda. So I paid her off. Two grand, to get an abortion. End of problem. Never heard from her again.

Until today maybe. That damned picture. That's what triggered the dream. That and being back in this two-bit town after all these years.

Scott was right, the kid did look a little like me. And he looked even more like my little brother Bobby. Weird. Bob died

of leukemia at thirteen and now this kid . . . It was like seeing Bobby's ghost.

Could he really be mine? Well, why not? So maybe Tammy hadn't gotten an abortion all those years ago. She kept the money, married some straight john, and lived happily ever after. Only her son has my face, and he's a ballplayer. So?

So why hadn't she told me? Asked for child support? I was bucks up in those years. Most women I'd known weren't shy about asking for money. Nor were their lawyers.

Unless she'd told Mister Straight John the kid was his. Or maybe he was. The kid's looks could be just a coincidence.

So why not find out? It's not like I had much else to do. Besides, I was curious. What was Tammy like now? How had things turned out for her? The kid's name was . . . Donnie Valerio. I flipped through the bedside phone book. No listing. Terrific. Now what? What's my next pitch? Focus. His address was on the back of the picture, and it was still on my desk at the park.

The house was a brown split-level ranch, postage stamp lawn, no garage. I parked my Corvette beside a battered Ford wagon in the driveway. My 'Vette was only six weeks old. Bought it when I landed the job

with the Milers. Not to celebrate but to remind myself that I wasn't a total loser. A damned, expensive reminder.

What would Tammy look like now? She'd been pretty in a coltish sort of way in the old days. Tall. Almost boyish. Probably big as a condo now. I rang the bell, feeling wired, nervous as a kid on his first date.

The porch light came on, then the door opened, but only a crack. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Valerio?"

"What do you want? Are you a reporter?"

"Reporter? No, ma'am, I'm Calvin Kenyon, the new manager of the Milan Milers. Your son Donnie had his picture taken with me the other day. I was in the neighborhood and—"

"Picture?"

"Yes, ma'am." I held up the photo. "For Little League."

She opened the door. She was ample all right, large bosom, dark hair and eyes, about five two. And she definitely wasn't Tammy. "Thank you," she said, taking the picture from me. Then she closed the door in my face.

I stood there like an idiot. So much for romantic reunions. And small-town courtesy. I didn't realize how pumped I'd been until the disappointment kicked in. It felt like I'd been yanked

from a game after one lame pitch. Damn.

I stopped at the first roadside bar. Gino's. A local dive, quiet, dim, a few solitary drinkers. I ordered a Killian's draft, killed half of it in two gulps, then slowed down. No hurry. I had no particular place to go. I finished the draft, ordered another, then had a thought. I checked out the book chained to the pay phone by the front door. And found a T. Kowalski listed. Tammy? Maybe. Only one way to find out.

The townhouse apartments were nice but not pricey: two story, gray brick facade. I rang the buzzer, and the door opened.

"Hi, Bumpkin," I said. "So how've you been?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Just stared. She was barefoot, wearing jeans and a Michigan State sweatshirt. Her chestnut hair was shorter, there were a few worry lines around her eyes, but she was definitely Tammy. And she looked roughly a thousand percent better than I remembered. "Have I ah, come at a bad time?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. I saw in the paper that you were back in town. What do you want, Cal?"

"To say hello."

"I have a telephone. I've had one for years."

"I know, that's how I found you. Can I come in a minute? Just to talk?"

She hesitated, then stepped aside. "Why not?"

The living room carpeting was gray berber that matched the Danish Modern furniture. It was clean, and the air was scented with the aroma of fresh cornbread. A little girl in a blue jumpsuit peered in from another room. She was seven or so, with shoulder-length chestnut hair and Tammy's eyes. She eyed me a moment, then solemnly offered her hand.

"Hi, I'm Jennifer."

"I'm Calvin," I said, shaking her small hand.

"Finish coloring your picture, honey," Tammy said. "Mr. Kenyon can't stay long."

The girl turned obediently and trudged toward the kitchen.

Her left leg dragged behind the other a little.

"She's lovely," I said.

"Yes, she is," Tammy said, scanning my face. "You look tired, Cal."

"I know. It's how I look these days. You, on the other hand, look terrific."

"Which brings us back to square one. What do you want?"

"To see you. To talk a minute. Is that so hard to believe?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. What do we have to talk about?"

"How about the good old days?"

"Is that what they were? It seems like a lifetime ago. I don't think about the past much."

"Then let's talk about now. What have you been up to lately?"

"I'm a branch manager for the Second National Bank," she said briskly. "Jennifer's in first grade, my father passed away two years ago, my mom still lives on the farm. And nobody calls me Bumpkin any more. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"You haven't asked about me."

"I don't have to. I know about you. Five years with the Tigers, three more with Milwaukee, then your arm started to fade. The Tiges brought you back for short relief last year, but your ERA was higher than Sparky's IQ. They probably offered you the job with the Milers so they wouldn't have to eat your contract."

"It's nice to know you've kept track."

"Morbid fascination. Sometimes I gawk at car wrecks, too."

"Hey, it's been ten years, Tam. Are you still angry?"

"I'm not *still* angry, I'm angry all over again. You show up out of the blue without even calling and expect—hell, I don't know

what you expected. But if you're looking for that eighteen-year-old hick that cared about you once, she's gone. A long time ago."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You haven't."

"No? You could have fooled me. Maybe I'd better go. 'Bye, Jennifer," I called. No answer. Her mother's daughter. "By the way, I noticed your daughter was limping. She sprain her ankle or something?"

Tammy hesitated, then shrugged. "*Spina bifida*. She's had three surgeries, two to go. She'll get better, but she'll never be a hundred percent."

"I'm sorry."

"You keep saying that."

"Seems like it, doesn't it? Well, thanks for seeing me. Say, would you like to bring Jennifer to a game some afternoon? I could send you tickets."

"No, thanks. My boyfriend thinks baseball's boring."

"Yeah, well, sometimes it is. I'll see you, Tam."

"Cal?" she said, stopping me in the doorway. "Why did you really come? What did you want?"

I took a deep breath. Now or never. "I met a kid yesterday. One who was the right age. And the last time I saw you . . . well. You were pregnant. And so I wondered."

She stared up at me. And sud-

denly her eyes were swimming. She swallowed. Without a word she wheeled and stalked into another room. She returned with a manila envelope.

"Here," she said, slapping it into my hand. "This is the last of us. There's a publicity picture you autographed for me the day we met, a couple of letters you wrote to me from the road. And our daughter's death certificate."

"Our . . . daughter? But I thought—"

"That I had an abortion? I know we talked about it, but after you left, I just couldn't go through with it. So I carried the baby to term. I thought I might give her up, but I never got the chance. She was stillborn. But it was kind of you to ask about her after all this time, you bastard!"

I wanted to reach out to her, to offer some kind of comfort. But I didn't. I had no right. I took the envelope and left.

I parked the Corvette in its slot in the Holiday Inn lot. I sat there awhile, thinking, then climbed out and headed for the side door. A portly type in a summerweight blue suit was coming out of the entrance as I opened it. He did a doubletake, then stopped.

"Hey, you're Cal Kenyon,

right? The pitcher? Hey, I'm a big fan, Mr. Kenyon."

"Thanks," I said, trying to ease past him. "You'll have to excuse me, I'm running late."

"I understand," he said, offering his hand. "I just want to welcome you to Milan and wish you luck."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." As I reached for his hand, he seemed to miss my grip. He grabbed my thumb in his fist instead and bent it back.

God! The pain was incredible. I clawed at his hand, but I couldn't get leverage. He twisted my thumb, forcing me to my knees. He leaned over, his head beside mine.

"Listen up, hotshot," he hissed. "Your game's baseball, hear? You mess with anything else, you'll be pitchin' from a freakin' wheelchair. You read me?"

He slammed the heel of his hand into my temple, stunning me, knocking me down. I rolled, clutching my wrenched thumb, trying to get clear of him. When I staggered to my feet, he was already disappearing into the shadows at the far end of the parking lot.

I stumbled up the stairs to my room, locked myself in, then turned on the cold water tap in the bath and held my hand under it. The water eased the throbbing a little. No major

damage. Christ, I'd thought the bastard had dislocated it. He could have if he'd wanted to.

What the hell was that about? Stick to baseball? What kind of psycho crap was that? But as the water soothed my thumb, it cleared my head a little as well.

Come on, focus. The guy wasn't a disgruntled fan or a wacko. He'd known who I was. He'd been waiting for me, and he took me in a place where we wouldn't be seen. Hell, I hadn't even gotten a good look at him myself. A pro, then. But at what? Nobody needed to tell me to stick to baseball unless . . .

He had to be warning me about the kid. But why? Who was this guy? Tammy's boyfriend? Nah, couldn't picture that. Tammy looked fit and feisty. Better than she had at eighteen, which was no mean feat. This guy was fifteen years too old and flab city to boot. He definitely wasn't Tammy's type. Besides, it'd happened too soon. I'd driven straight to the motel from her apartment, and the guy was already here, waiting.

That left Mrs. Valerio. When she blew me off without a word, I'd thought she was just rude or maybe a little strange. Well, maybe not. Maybe I'd rattled a family cage, and she'd sent her husband around to warn me off.

But why? What had I done that would bug Valerio enough

to risk an assault charge? I didn't ask her anything, didn't mess in any game they might have going. All I'd done was show up. Why would that be enough to get my hand broken?

I had no answers. Which meant I didn't have enough information to make the next pitch. I needed a scouting report. Fortunately I knew where to get it.

I called the local newspaper and got a reporter named Grimes who'd interviewed me a dozen times over the years. I offered him a swap, some background information for a favor to be named later.

"What kind of background information?" he asked warily.

"Whatever you've got in your morgue on a couple of names. Tamara Kowalski and a Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Valerio and son Donnie."

"Kowalski, Valerio, and son, got it. This Arthur Valerio, is he a ballplayer? His name sounds familiar."

"Football player maybe. He's a big guy, no sense of humor."

"Sounds like a footballer," Grimes said. "I'll punch 'em into the computer and get back to you."

Twenty minutes later Grimes called back with the readout I'd asked for. It was mostly numbers, vital statistics, with one oddity.

"How do you know this Arthur Valerio?" Grimes asked.

"I don't know him. I just kind of bumped into him."

"Recently, you mean?"

"Earlier tonight."

"That'd be a pretty good trick," Grimes said. "According to our files, he's doing hard time at 3000 Cooper Street, Jackson."

"He's in prison? For what?"

"Criminal tax evasion. I thought his name sounded familiar. I remember the case now. Your pal Valerio was an accountant for Santo Zavone, a local mob guy. Valerio pled guilty to tax fraud but he wouldn't rat out his boss, so the judge hit him with the max, eight years, no parole. Wanna tell me what this is about?"

"I honestly don't know, but I owe you one, Grimes. I won't forget it."

"Neither will I, sport." He hung up without a goodbye.

I looked at the notes I'd taken, but except for Arthur Valerio's present address, there was nothing unusual. Donnie Valerio was born ten years ago to Arthur and Constanza Valerio at Samaritan Hospital. Tammy's daughter Jennifer was born at the same hospital three years later. And five years ago Arthur Valerio began serving an eight year stretch for tax fraud. But not at some white-

collar country club. He was at Jackson prison. The toughest. So my surly friend in the parking lot definitely wasn't Arthur. Who was he, then, and what was his beef with me?

None of it connected. Until I focused. And realized I was still missing a bit of information. Another number. I checked the date on the death certificate Tammy had given me. And things began to make a warped kind of sense.

Southern Michigan Prison at Jackson is the biggest stone-walled prison in the world. Fifty-five hundred inmates. The last escape was in '75 when a helicopter swooped down to snatch a con from the yard. They had him back inside in a day.

I'd pitched in a couple of exhibition games at the prison for Ron LaFlore, a former Detroit Tiger who was a Jackson grad. Bernie Greenbaum, an assistant warden, remembered me and issued me a visitor's pass without the usual background check.

To keep things off the books, Bernie set up the interview in the prison library, a huge, stack-filled room from another century. Books only, no computers, no CD's. The only modern trappings were the wall-mounted video cameras scanning the aisles.

A mob accountant. I'm not sure what I'd expected, Mr. Peepers or a jug-eared thug the size of Ohio, but Arthur Valerio looked ordinary. A small man, five seven, maybe a hundred and forty pounds, with thinning black hair and horn-rimmed glasses. He had a De Niro-type mole on one cheek, and he wore street clothes, not prison denims. White shirt, dark slacks, and loafers. No tie, no belt.

He eased down at the table across from me. He didn't offer to shake hands. Nor did I.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Valerio."

"It's all right," he said quietly. "I've been expecting you for a long time now. How is your hand?"

"It's okay, no thanks to you."

"I'm sorry about what happened," he said, meeting my eyes. "My wife panicked when you came to the house. She called a man I used to work with. That was a mistake, and I apologize."

"No harm done. Yet. What did you mean, you've been expecting me?"

"I was an accountant before I came here. I know about credits and debts. And even if I hadn't known, this place teaches you a lot about paying up."

"For Donnie, you mean?"

"Right," he said, looking away. "For Donnie. It . . . may not

mean much to you, but I'd like you to understand how it was. We had no children, my wife and I, so when Constanza became pregnant, it was an incredible blessing. A gift. But it wasn't to be. My wife had health problems. She developed diabetes. The sonograms showed the child was underweight and unlikely to survive. The doctors recommended a therapeutic abortion, but we're Catholic. Are you Catholic, Mr. Kenyon?"

"No. I'm not anything really."

"Donnie has been raised Catholic, but . . . well, anyway. My employer noticed I was depressed and asked me what was wrong. And so I poured out my heart to him. And he said he'd look into it. That's all. He'd look into it. And later, when Constanza gave birth to a healthy boy, I didn't ask how this miracle had been accomplished. You understand? I didn't ask."

He paused for a moment, breathing heavily, trying to control emotions I could only guess at.

"Is that how you wound up here? By not asking questions?"

"No, not at all. As I said, debts must be paid. Several years afterward, my employer, Mr. Zavone, came to me and explained what had been done, how the babies had been . . . exchanged. That was when I first heard your ladyfriend's name. And

yours, of course. And then Mr. Zavone begged me to save his son from prison. And so here I am."

"You took a fall for Zavone's son?" I said slowly. "You're doing time now as some kind of a . . . payback? For Donnie?"

He nodded grimly. "It's almost poetic. Mr. Zavone died two years ago, his son's in jail on another charge. And I still have three years to go. It's my debt, and I would gladly have paid twice as many years for Donnie. But I've done a lot of thinking in here. And I realize that the wrong we did to Miss Kolwalski and to you can't be repaid with prison time or money. It can only be paid one way. And now you've come. For Donnie."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"One thing I want you to know, Mr. Kenyon. You have every right to despise me, and even Mr. Zavone. But not my wife. Constanza didn't know at the time. I only told her recently, when I learned you were coming back to Milan. That's why she was so frightened when you went to our house. She called me afterward, and we talked a long time. It will be very hard for us, but we're ready to . . . do the right thing."

"The right thing?"

"For you. And for Donnie."

That's what troubles me most about this. Donnie. How can I tell him what I did? He'll despise me. And yet maybe it's best that he does. It will be easier for my wife, for everyone really, if Donnie decides to go with you of his own choice. If he simply chooses his famous father over me."

"And you think that's what he'll do?"

"Of course. Look at us, Mr. Kenyon. If you were a boy, which of us would you choose? The convict or the big league ballplayer?"

I didn't answer. Instead I glanced around at the window slits and the bars, sensing the soul-crushing pressure in the air, the weight of stone walls and steel gates and fear.

"I'm not a major leaguer any more, Mr. Valerio," I said, facing him at last. "I'm bush league now. In a lot of ways, I've always been bush league. I walked away from Donnie's mother before he was born because they were . . . inconvenient. And even if I'd known how well he'd turn out, I could never have paid the price for him that you've paid. I don't have that kind of courage. Even in this place you're a better father to him than I ever could have been. And a better man."

Valerio's eyes were locked on mine.

"What I'm saying is, I don't think tearing Donnie away from the only family he's known is the right thing to do now. There must be some better way."

Valerio looked away and swallowed. But when he faced me again, his face was still wooden. Unreadable. "And Miss Kowalski? What does she say?"

"She doesn't know yet," I admitted. "She's the one who's been injured most in this, but that was my fault. I'll have to find a way to make things right for her somehow."

He gave a jerky nod and rose. He hesitated, then offered me his hand. I took it.

"It must be hard in here," I said. "If I can do anything for you or for . . . your son, please let me know."

He started to say something but didn't. He turned and walked away, a bit unsteadily. He didn't look back.

I found them at a small park across the street from her apartment. Tammy was pushing Jennifer on a swing, both of them laughing in the sun, a spring breeze tousling their hair. I sat at a picnic table, watching, waiting for them to notice me. When Tammy did, her smile vanished. She left Jennifer on the swing and stalked over.

"I thought we understood each other, Cal. I can't handle any

more trips down memory lane. The road's too rough."

"I'm not much on nostalgia myself," I said, squinting up at her. The sun glowed behind her, haloing her hair. "I'm more interested in the future. Maybe we could talk about that."

"There's no future for us, Cal. There never was."

"I'm not so sure. We were just kids. What did we know? But I'd like to get to know you now. I'd like it a lot. What do you think?"

"No chance," she said firmly. "Zero. Zip. Nada. Is there any part of that you don't understand?"

"There might be. It's been ten years. And you're still angry. Why would you still be mad at me if you didn't care? Just a little?"

She eyed me like graffiti on a bus station wall. "My God. That's the most incredible leap of masculine logic I've ever heard. You arrogant—Jennifer! We have to go. There are weirdos in the park today." She stormed off to collect her daughter.

"And you've never married," I called after her. "And what about my picture? You knew exactly where it was, and it was awfully handy. What about that?"

She gathered Jennifer up and stalked off without replying. Jennifer glanced back at me. I waved. She didn't wave back. But she smiled. I think.

God. Watching them go gave me the same sick feeling I used to get when some clown hampered my best pitch into the upper deck. Only worse. Much worse. Still, I didn't look away.

When somebody hits me, I make myself watch him jog the bases and collect his high fives when he crosses home plate. It hurts, but it reminds me not to throw him that particular pitch again.

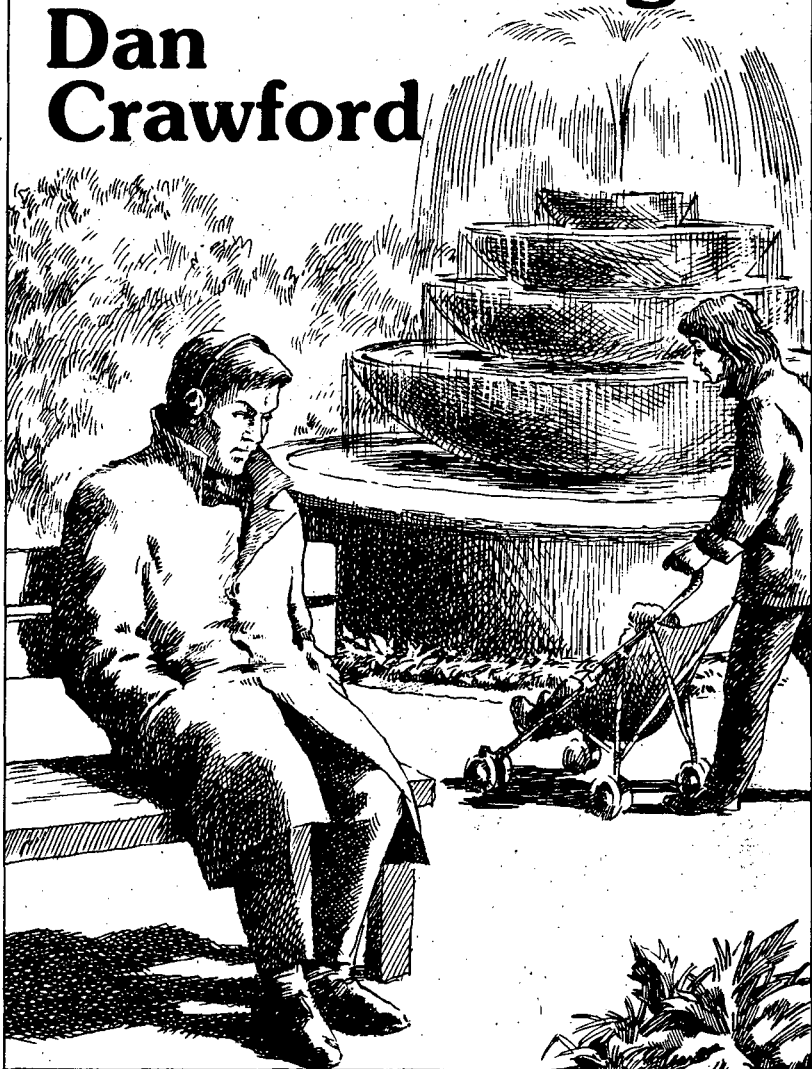
I'd messed up ten years ago. I couldn't change that. But I've learned a few things since then. And one of them is that everybody gets hit sometimes, big leaguers or bush. Everybody. If you're in the game, it's gonna happen. And it doesn't matter.

What matters is what happens next. Bush leaguers choke. They give up. Big leaguers focus on what's important. And hang in there. Until they find a way to win.

So even as I watched them walk away, I knew this game wasn't over. Not yet. And I was already planning my next pitch.

Device Is Right

Dan Crawford



I looked like any slightly frazzled office worker soothing his nerves by sitting in the sun on his lunchbreak. What I wore at my waist, with a wire to the earphones on my head, looked like any cheap personal elevator-music system.

But I was a man with a mission. And what I wore was my Device #7, just one of my numerous creations designed to help humankind struggle out of the mess it had gotten itself into. It had worked well enough in the workshop; I wanted to see how it would perform in the field, or park as it were.

A target came within reach, riding in an obviously second-hand stroller. His mother paused to point at a birdie. Junior wasn't interested in the birdie. But I was interested in Junior. I directed the probe in my hand at him.

"Okay," said Device #7 through the earphones.

"Well?" I whispered into the button on my collar. "What's the score? Will the world be better off if that kid dies before he grows up?"

"The toddler before you will grow up into an enthusiastic wifebeater, and his children will live in terror of him," Device #7 informed me.

That was the purpose of Device #7. Enough of these diagnostic devices in the right hands and we could ensure a far more peaceful generation to come. I slid a hand toward the gun in my pocket. I couldn't handle matters here and now, of course, but if I followed them home, I would likely figure out a way to . . .

"Further, he will be the star shortstop whose play will be responsible for the Red Sox victory in the World Series twenty years from now."

"Um," I said. This was enough to give me serious second thoughts.

"And his daughter, whom he will abuse frightfully, will grow up to be one of the world's great poets."

"You know," I told my collar button, "you're not being very helpful."

"My job is to answer questions," said Device #7. "Whether the answers are helpful or not is your affair."

"Look," I said, trying to keep my voice to a gentle whisper so I didn't attract Junior's attention. "Just tell me. On the whole, on the average, will the world be better off if he were to die within the next day or so, or worse off?"

"There are a lot of variables I'll have to figure in," said the Device. "Give me a second."



Junior was bouncing his fists on the belt around his middle, refusing to take any interest at all in the birdie. Mom pushed him farther along the sidewalk but, to my relief, stopped at the water fountain. I eased forward on the bench.

"You there?" inquired the Device.

"Yes."

"The world will be better off if you kill him."

I stood up. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Mom had to tip the stroller up a bit to swivel around the base of the water fountain. I took a step forward.

"What tipped the scales?" I inquired.

"Because," Device #7 told me, "you'll go to the chair for the murder, and then the world will have one less person like you in it."

I thought that over, and turned in the direction of my workshop. Device #8, I thought, probably had more marketing potential.

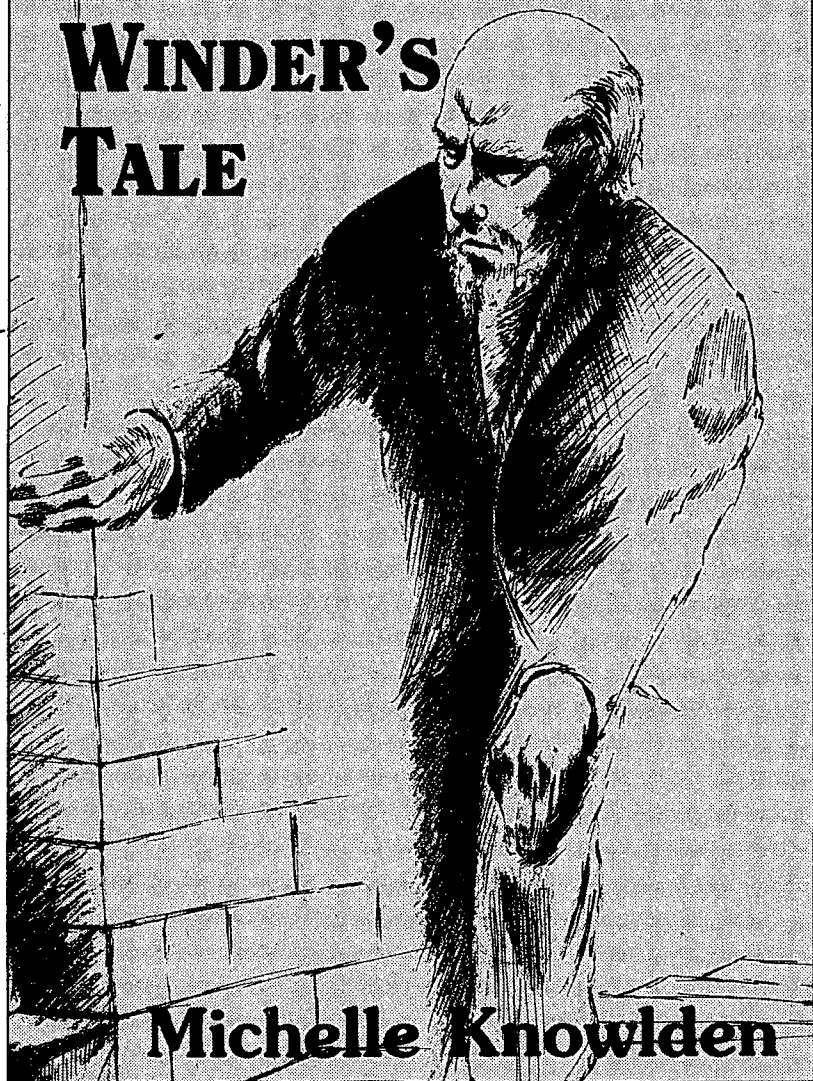
SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

King Mark Oldoff and Queen Brenda of Jamlandia fatally stabbed
King Larry Ranoff and Queen Gilda of Nulandia.

| KING/QUEEN | FORMERLY | KINGDOM | ARR. | STAYED | DEP. |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
| James/Elvira Quidoff | barber | Haglandia | 12:00 | 3:55 | 3:55 |
| Norman/Angela Taxoff | farmer | Kinlandia | 12:05 | 3:50 | 3:55 |
| Larry/Gilda Ranoff | dairyman | Nulandia | 12:10 | ----- | ----- |
| Isaac/Diana Popoff | handyman | Inlandia | 12:15 | 3:40 | 3:55 |
| Mark/Brenda Oldoff | gardener | Jamlandia | 12:20 | 3:50 | 4:10 |
| Harry/Flora Uboff | carpenter | Laxlandia | 12:25 | 3:20 | 3:45 |
| Karl/Cindy Setzoff | pedlar | Mylandia | 12:30 | 3:20 | 3:50 |

FICTION

THE CLOCK WINDER'S TALE



Michelle Knowlden

Illustration by Michael Delaney

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/97

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If everything goes according to schedule, the Ebola virus should be ravaging my system in early December," I told my secretary while trying to balance a weekly planner and a medical encyclopedia in my arms. "Call Atlanta, the disease-control people, and confirm. They may want to send someone this time."

"Miss Cardex," Millie began.

I steadied myself against the counter that encircled her desk as a tidal wave of dizziness enveloped me. I'd really thought I'd be skipping dizziness, although it was the next disease listed in *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* after diphtheria, which I'd just contracted a month ago. If I survived the other maladies found in letters D through U, I'd be having vertigo sometime in the twenty-first century. So why would I be suffering through it now? Ah well, it is not the invalid's plight to wonder, but to endure. "Miss Cardex," Millie said insistently.

"You might tell them about the dysentery that'll hit me the month before the Ebola. I realize it's a common disease, but we should at least report it and they'll appreciate the advance warning. They collect the data for statistical reasons, you know."

Millie tapped her desk with a

pencil: "Miss Cardex, please. There is someone . . ."

I peered through the dancing motes of my dizziness at the planner. "I was certain I'd have grown a duodenal ulcer by now, but it appears we'll have to push that date forward a bit. Put it just after Thanksgiving. Wait a minute. I'm to spend Thanksgiving with Aunt Helena this year. Better schedule it for Thanksgiving Day." I tapped my own pencil on the date in question. If I hadn't been a victim of a rare alphabetical immune deficiency, Aunt Helena would have given me an ulcer years ago. I propped myself against the counter again; the thought of her made me feel faint.

"Miss Cardex," Millie hissed desperately. "This is Mr. Egdon Heath. He'd like to see you."

I blinked and slowly pulled myself up. Standing near the door, a small man with a neat gray beard blinked nervously back. He was dressed in a worn gray flannel suit and an old tie that looked scarcely used. His shoes were worn down to comfort with frayed laces. He worried a black knit cap with anxious fingers. A thin cloud of white hair fluttered in the gusts of wind punctuated by the opening and closing of the outer door of Cardex and LaMare Detective Agency.

"My name is Micky Cardex," I

said reluctantly. "How may I help you?"

"Oh, not you," Egdon Heath said breathlessly. "Why—you're a woman."

"That's so," I agreed heartily. "And deathly ill as well. Perhaps my partner, Gary LaMare, can assist you?"

"Perhaps," he said uncertainly. "Does Mr. LaMare deal with murder?" The last word he nearly swallowed in a tremulous gulp. Millie gasped.

I shook my head ruefully. "I'm afraid not. He's into insurance. Mainly property damage, liability, et cetera. It's not a life insurance claim?"

When he shook his head, I patted his hand gently. "Well never mind then. Let me recommend one of my colleagues. A male one who specializes in murder, eh?"

"Who was murdered?" Millie asked avidly while I searched for a business card in her Rolodex. It was not very professional of her to inquire, but Wildemark's a small town and I usually had to hunt up my murder cases outside of it. Usually outside of Wisconsin as well. Few indeed had passed through these agency halls.

"I believe my sister was murdered, but I can't be sure." The bell at St. Bruno's suddenly tolled from across the street, and he hurriedly thumbed open

his pocket watch. He nodded, then relaxed and ticked the watch shut. "Sometimes it's difficult to see the difference between an unnatural ending and a natural one," he said earnestly. "Don't you think so?"

"Ah, here's a good fellow," I said with satisfaction. "Merle Bendenwohl. He's almost as good with murder as I am. And his office is only about a block from here."

"Please sit down here, Mr. Heath. Would you like a cup of tea?" Without waiting for an answer, Millie poured him a mugful of stout black Pekoe. He perched diffidently on a seat near her desk. "When did your sister die?" she asked sympathetically.

"About thirty years ago," he murmured. "You're probably wondering why it's taken me so long to report her murder."

Millie did indeed look surprised, and not much surprises a retired fourth grade teacher. I snapped my fingers. "Wait a minute. Didn't Merle retire last year? Millie—didn't I go to Merle's retirement party sometime last year?"

She ignored me. "I do wonder, sir, but I'm sure you have your reasons."

"Walter Foster," I said warmly. The Rolodex rocked beneath my fingers. "I should have thought of him first. He's good

with murders, too. Gets it right nearly every time. Let me write his number down for you."

"I was blind," Egdon Heath said sadly. "Wracked with grief at the time. The funeral happening so fast on the heels of her dying. I never questioned it, or her husband. He was the devil with his lies and stories. I didn't know it then, but I do now."

I scratched my head fretfully and wondered if I would keel over soon. I really needed to lie down on the sofa in my office and wait for this flurry of spells to pass. "Walter's no good," I said dismally. "I just remembered he had a stroke last month. I think Robyn told me he's recuperating in Bermuda. Some people have all the luck."

Millie stared at Egdon Heath with wide eyes. "You think her husband did it? How?"

He swallowed, and his eyes dropped to the mug cupped in his hands. "Gave her poison, I think," he said softly. "It's been keeping me up nights since I found the evidence in the ledger. I can't rest till I know for sure."

The door flew open again, the bell tinkled, and an icy gust struck me. I shuddered and drew my cardigan around me. "Fenton Hughes? No, he went back to the furniture business. Just as well, not much good at detecting. Harry Masterson? Didn't his wife come into some

money and they moved to Wyoming? I think I got a postcard from them last summer. He's spending all his time fishing."

"The ledger?" Millie asked. Her own tea sat forgotten in front of her.

He nodded grimly. "I found it in a box of her things last week. You see, Ruth had a bit of money from an aunt of ours who died just before she and Jackson married. The marriage was a surprise to everyone. Jackson could have picked any of the girls in town, and some say he'd had most of them beforehand. Ruth was a quiet one; she kept house for our dad and me and did the books for the shop. Jackson swept her away, and in a space of a few weeks they were wed and living in a cottage she'd bought with our dead aunt's money. A month after that she was gone."

"Murdered?" a voice demanded.

I cringed. I knew without turning that Aunt Helena stood behind me. Gregory, her pale shadow of a secretary and for these many years her unpublished poet protégé, faded silently into the wallpaper. Defeated, I pushed the Rolodex away and once more collapsed against the counter.

Egdon Heath nodded. "Murdered by that black-hearted rogue. I think it might be true."

Aunt Helena drew herself up; the ribbons on her lavender hat wiggled indignantly. "The fiend," she thundered. "We'll see him in jail before dusk."

"Aunt Helena," I said, "Mr. Heath prefers a male detective. I'm looking for a referral now." Which wasn't exactly true, since I'd just exhausted my list of male private detectives specializing in murder, but one must rein in Aunt Helena before she's in full stampede. I brightened. "Mr. Heath, if you haven't already, you really should see the police."

"I did. They looked into it, but as her doctor hadn't recorded anything unnatural about her death, they said they didn't have enough to go on. Since Jackson Boyle is dead, too, I think they lost interest in it."

Even this checked Aunt Helena. "You say the murderer is dead?"

He sipped at the dregs of his tea. "Aye. Died a few weeks ago. His last wife sent on that box of Ruth's things. I should have had 'em after she passed away, but Jackson knew it would be his undoing. Kept them from me these thirty years."

"Why bother with an investigation, then? There's no one to arrest," Aunt Helena said.

"No one at all," I agreed briskly. "Now that it's all settled, may I help you with the

door, Mr. Heath? The latch sometimes sticks."

He stood hesitantly. "I thought it might be a useless thing to pursue. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He shuffled slowly to the door.

"You can't let him go like that," my cousin Robyn hissed in my ear. I didn't even flinch. She'd come from Gary's office and caught Egdon Heath's last few words. Although it wasn't his words that affected her but his forlorn air.

"Wait," Robyn called out to him, and shot me a simmering look. Egdon Heath paused at the door and looked sadly back at us.

"He wants a male detective," I protested. "And he says everyone's dead. What would be the point?"

"The truth," he said. "I want the truth told."

"Of course. The truth," Aunt Helena said. Her eyes began to gleam.

To Millie's disappointment, we reconvened in my office. Robyn joined us. She represents the literary investigations branch of Cardex and LaMare while pursuing her doctorate in literature. Since there's a dearth of delving into old manuscripts (or at least of clients willing to pay for it), Robyn assists me more in my cases than

she works on her own. And this she does with considerably more enthusiasm than I can muster.

I slumped in my chair and fiddled with the clock on my desk. Egdon Heath's eyes fixed on the clock and clung to the sight of it.

Gregory's slender hand rifled a casket of cookies on the sideboard near the sofa and dreamily passed morsel after morsel into his mouth. I sighed. After a visit from Aunt Helena and Gregory, I rarely had more than crumbs left.

Of course, Aunt Helena and Gregory shouldn't have been there at all. Neither is a licensed detective or associated with the agency. Aunt Helena was married to my father's brother, who'd died years ago, making me, Robyn, and several other Cardex cousins beneficiaries of his trust. Conditionally so. Being aware of the tendency to sloth of some Cardexes, Uncle made gainful employment a condition of the monthly dividends. As executor of Uncle's trust, Aunt Helena exercises her oversight with vigor.

"Your clock isn't working," Mr. Heath said.

I stopped drumming my fingers on it and looked at it with surprise. "You're right. Dratted thing. Well, no matter. I'm not much of a clock watcher."

Aunt Helena snorted. "You of all people should be, Michaela.

I'll bring you another tomorrow."

"May I?" Without waiting for a reply, Egdon Heath expertly flipped the clock over and removed the back.

"Isn't that Grandfather's clock, Micky?" Robyn asked.

"Not to worry," I said. Then I paused till the fuzzy blackness receded. "Egdon Heath is St. Bruno's clock winder. I read an article about him in the *Wilde-mark Herald*. He's been the clock winder at the church for more than forty years. Started as an apprentice when he was ten."

He murmured something, but now that his attention was caught by the clock, he'd forgotten us. His shyness and nervous tics sloughed off as he fell fingers first into the clock's workings.

"Egdon Heath," Robyn said. "That name's familiar. I must have read the article, too."

I laughed, then fought off the waves of faintness that threatened to drown me. "It sounds familiar because of Thomas Hardy," I said weakly.

"Oh, that's right," she said, embarrassed. "I should have realized."

"Thomas Hardy as in those incorrigible Hardy boys?" Aunt Helena demanded. "The ones who make a right hash of good detective work, then have to be

rescued by their dashing father?" The lavender ribbons wiggled in vexation.

"That was Joe and Frank Hardy, Aunt," I said. "I didn't know you'd read their books. They don't seem to be quite your thing."

"Thomas Hardy the writer," Robyn said helpfully. "Egdon Heath was a place that appeared in several of his novels."

"He wrote a poem about clock winders," Egdon Heath said. He pulled out a worn case of tools and dismantled my clock. Wheels and springs and tiny pins formed neat piles between the medicine bottles on my desk. "Father wanted me called after something of Thomas Hardy's, since I would inherit the daily windings from my uncle, who'd followed his father in it. My great-grandfather was the first clock winder at St. Bruno's. Heath's our family name. Father named me Egdon after reading Hardy's works."

"And do you avoid women for the same reason as Hardy's clock winder?" Robyn asked gently.

He blushed. "I don't know," he said without looking up. "I never could unravel his poetry. Women are even harder to understand."

"What nonsense," Aunt Helena growled. "Shows a lack of application on your part. Women are as easy as men to compre-

hend; only our style is different. That is to say, *we* have style. Men do not. Everything's clear after that."

"Right," he said, unconvinced.

"Was your uncle related to the aunt who'd left your sister Ruth the inheritance?" I asked, trying to sort out the relationships.

He nodded. "Uncle Farley was brother to my father and married to Ida. They had no children of their own. Couldn't have 'em. That was why I was to follow Uncle in his clock windings and Aunt Ida doted on Ruth. The money Aunt Ida gave Ruth wasn't meant to be an inheritance, though. Ida had a tricky heart and in that last year knew her time was nearly gone. She put a few dollars a week in Ruth's keeping for a fine headstone. She knew Uncle Farley wouldn't go for much. A granite chiseled with the name and born this year and died that one was good enough for him. All else was flummery."

He glanced up at me. "He sounds a rough man, but he meant only good. Aunt's dying was difficult for him, and he held to what he thought was right. And he stuck to those rules during the long months of her illness." He rubbed his head ruefully. "He was a tough taskmaster."

He paused and squinted at

the clock's inner workings. "What have we here? There's a bit of dirt between the lever pallets and the escapement. That'll foul things up. Should run fine now." Expertly he cobbled the clock together again.

"Aunt Ida wanted something more than a granite marker," Robyn prompted him.

"Oh, aye, she did. Wanted something flossy with angels and curlicues and other such things. She wanted fine words, poems, and the family grievings in marble. Every week she'd bring a bit more money to hide with Ruth. When she finally died, there was enough to buy the largest headstone in the graveyard. More than seven hundred dollars."

"Those were the good days," I said sadly. "A decent marker goes for twice that now. I know. I've shopped around for mine." Robyn and Aunt Helena glared at me. "What's wrong?" I asked irritably. "The price of grave-stones *could* be relevant."

"Jackson Boyle took up with Ruth a few weeks before Aunt Ida died. Somehow he'd found out about the money. After Ida was gone, he persuaded her to use the money on a small cottage instead. And she did, that besotted with him she was."

"Why does this story sound familiar?" Robyn asked, puzzled.

"It's another Thomas Hardy

poem," I said. "The one about the woman who gave her niece a sixpence every week for eighty weeks for a headstone. After the aunt died, the girl's lover persuaded her to spend it on a night on the town instead of a headstone."

"Scandalous," Aunt Helena cried. "Does no one respect the dead?"

"No one," I agreed somberly. Egdon Heath delicately tapped down the last fastener in the movement.

"Well," Robyn said. "There is something to be said about leaving your dead behind and focusing on the living."

Aunt Helena and I stared at her. "And your point would be?" I inquired.

"Never mind," Robyn sighed. "It is hard for me to believe that poetry can be lived out in a murder case." Gregory looked affronted, his poetic sensibilities maligned.

"Believe it," I said. "There is more of human nature in verse than was ever found in psychology books."

Snapping the clock frame to its casing, Egdon Heath returned the timepiece to my desk and sat back in his chair. The steady tick-tick-tick of Grandfather's clock sounded in the room. With careless dignity Gregory finished the last cookie.

"Ruth only lived another four

weeks. Time to be married. Time to be poisoned."

"How—" Aunt Helena began.

"It was the ledger, you see. Better than a diary. She put Ida's gravestone money down in there, and the rat poison Jackson bought for the vermin in the woodpile. Then the aspirin for her headaches. She wasn't one for headaches. Then antacids for her sickness. Never a day of illness had she known before marrying Jackson. Then the treatments for hair loss. Her pretty hair falling out by handfuls. When we buried her, there was no money left to buy more than a granite marker with her name and the day she was born and the day she died."

Egdon Heath ceased speaking, and in the span of silence that followed, Grandfather's clock incremented the moments in unflagging, precise tocks. I remembered why I'd let the clock run down. Time should be allowed to pass in quietude.

"Clocks," I said.

The others looked at me, startled. Gregory's hand froze in the cookie casket in the act of ferreting out the last crumb.

"Do you only work with clocks with winding mechanisms?" I asked him.

"We've a shop," Egdon Heath said slowly. "My father, uncle, and I. Now just me. We sell all

sorts—spring, electric, pendulum—and repair the same."

"What happened to Boyle after your sister died?"

"He married four more times," he said bitterly. "But Ruth was the only wife he killed. In the letter she sent with the box of Ruth's things, his last wife said he'd died of a stroke."

"And is your uncle dead?" I asked urgently.

"Oh, aye," he said, giving me a strange look. "Dead these twenty years. Father's still living. Retired two years ago. He doesn't know anything about this. Ruth's passing was hard on him."

"Hard on your uncle, too?" I asked casually. "Especially so soon after his wife's death?"

He grimaced. "I don't think he grieved much. He found out about the money, you see, and hated Ruth for taking it. After his wife died, I think he finally wanted that fancy headstone to please her, but all he could give her was the granite marker. Then Ruth died, and I think Wildemark held nothing but sad memories for him. He sold his part of the shop to Father and passed the winding of St. Bruno's clock to me. He moved to Oregon, and we never saw him again. We got word of his death ten years later."

The room began to spin in

lazy circles. The light motes followed in splintered, tangential orbits. Waning rapidly, I had a small hallucination. *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* said they were common to my condition. In my hallucination I saw an uncle bent with sorrow climbing the clock tower at St. Bruno's. Fog floats down a narrow Wildemark street and puddles at the doorway of a small shop. A young man repairs an old mantel clock with his father. At the chiming of St. Bruno's bells, the two men exchange a worried glance.

The fog drifts down another street and thickens at a cottage window. Through the glass, I see a young woman, pale and sickly, lying on her bed. Her breath rattles in her breast. Like brown pine needles after a windstorm, strands of her hair slip to the floor. Her hair . . . Again the fog obscures. I see the granite-faced man slowly descend the winding stairs of the clock tower. Then the fog rolls through the Wildemark cemetery. I see a grave with a plain marker. Then I see two graves.

"Micky?" Robyn interrupted my dizzy spell. She scowled at me. Wearily I knuckled my blurry eyes and gathered my thoughts. Egdon Heath stared at me with guarded interest.

"Where had your uncle worked

with atomic clocks?" I finally asked.

Robyn and Gregory blinked. Aunt Helena frowned. "Fancy your knowing that," Egdon Heath said in amazement. "He worked with cesium and rubidium clocks in the war, and after his discharge, he had a small contract to service the base clocks in Dillon."

"Your sister died of radiation poisoning," I said. "The symptoms are similar to rat poisoning but not the same."

"Are you saying the wretched Jackson Boyle stole radiation from the shop and poisoned his wife with it?" Aunt Helena asked. "Why would he bother when he already had the rat poison?"

"I'm saying that Farley Heath, her uncle, somehow got Ruth to wear radioactive material over a matter of weeks till it finally killed her." The small clock winder didn't seem to hear me. He stared bewildered at the swirling carpet.

"Wear it?" Aunt Helena growled at me. Gregory grimaced and plucked nervously at a cufflink.

"Had he given her a gift?" I asked Egdon Heath. "A piece of jewelry perhaps?"

"The pendant," he said cautiously. "Uncle gave her a watch pendant after she married Jackson and spent Aunt Ida's mon-

ey. He said the pendant was Ida's and that she would have wanted Ruth to wear it always. And so she did. Partly in penance for keeping the headstone money."

"A dismal penance," I said. "When it kills the one who seeks forgiveness."

For a moment only the clock resounded, tick-tock, in the astonished silence. "What are you saying?" Egdon Heath finally stuttered. "Not that *Uncle* killed her? I told you it was Jackson Boyle."

"Your uncle, not her husband, killed Ruth. For stealing his wife's money. That's the truth."

"Uncle Farley was no killer. What kind of truth is that? Not any truth I'll believe in."

He jumped to his feet, and his eyes flashed angrily. "If I hear that you've spread that slander about my family, I'll make sure you regret it." He stormed out of the office. When the outer door slammed shut, I felt a trickle of icy air seep into the room.

"This is the limit," Aunt Helena roared. "If you will not cease by these absurd means to avoid your detective duties, I will stop your monthly checks. I swear to

you that I am *not* bluffing." She rose ponderously from her seat, and her hat ribbon gave a final, indignant shake. "Radioactive pendants indeed."

She stumped out of the office with Gregory trailing in her wake.

After a moment Robyn grimaced and patted my frail hand. "Bit risky, Micky, using a tactic like that. You'll really have to apply your nose to the grindstone till Aunt's forgotten this one."

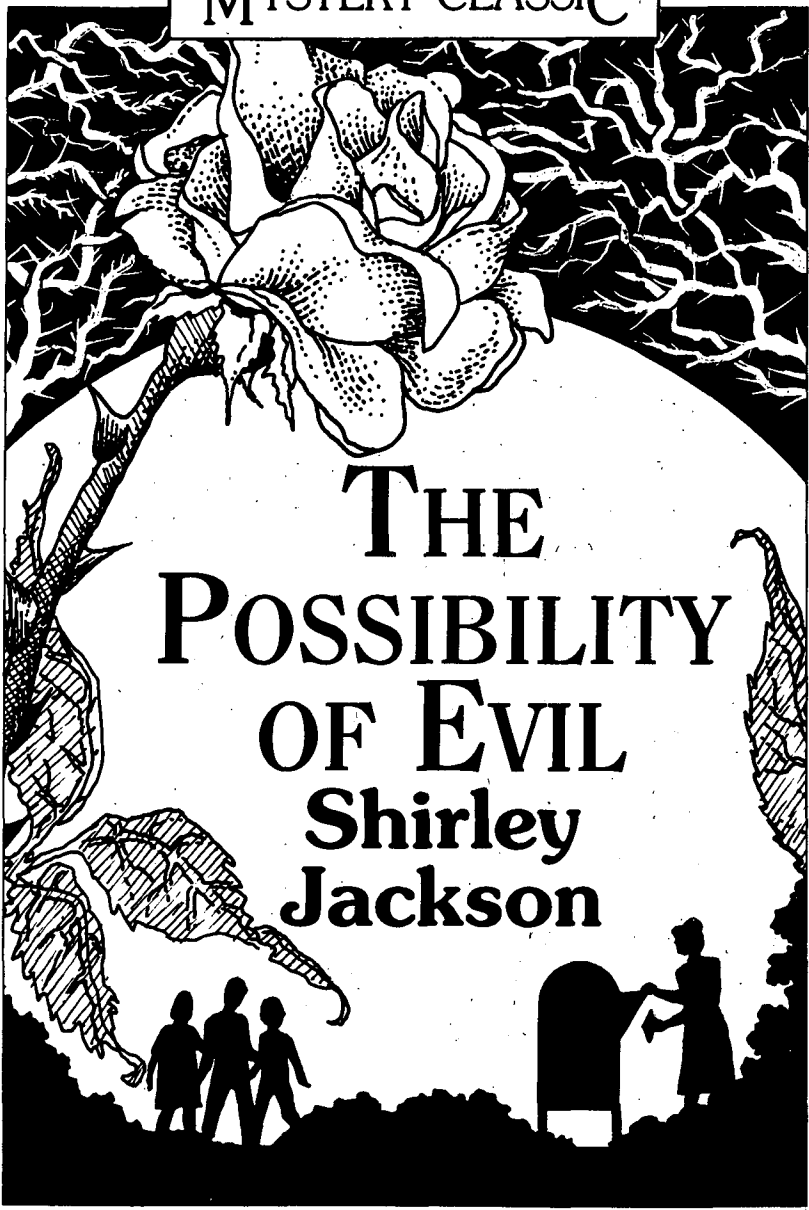
At the door to my office she turned and looked uncertainly at me. "It was a tactic, right? The uncle didn't really kill his niece, did he? Over a grave marker?"

I shrugged and said nothing. After a moment, Robyn left and shut the door behind her.

Not just any grave marker. But a headstone with angels and curlicues and family grievings in marble. Truth is a strange thing, and few love the telling of it.

In the quiet, Grandfather's clock ticked the passing of each minute. Many hours later it finally wound down and settled to silence once more.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL

Shirley
Jackson

Miss Adela Strangeworth came daintily along Main Street on her way to the grocery. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and clear after the night's heavy rain, and everything in Miss Strangeworth's little town looked washed and bright. Miss Strangeworth took deep breaths and thought that there was nothing in the world like a fragrant summer day.

She knew everyone in town, of course; she was fond of telling strangers—tourists who sometimes passed through the town and stopped to admire Miss Strangeworth's roses—that she had never spent more than a day outside this town in all her long life. She was seventy-one, Miss Strangeworth told the tourists, with a pretty little dimple showing by her lip, and she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her. "My grandfather built the first house on Pleasant Street," she would say, opening her blue eyes wide with the wonder of it. "This house, right here. My family has lived here for better than a hundred years. My grandmother planted these roses, and my mother tended them, just as I do. I've watched my town grow; I can remember when Mr. Lewis, Senior, opened the grocery store, and the year the river flooded out the shanties on the low road, and the excitement when some young folks wanted to move the park over to the space in front of where the new post office is today. They wanted to put up a statue of Ethan Allen—" Miss Strangeworth would frown a little and sound stern "—but it should have been a statue of my grandfather. There wouldn't have been a town here at all if it hadn't been for my grandfather and the lumber mill."

Miss Strangeworth never gave away any of her roses, although the tourists often asked her. The roses belonged on Pleasant Street, and it bothered Miss Strangeworth to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets. When the new minister came, and the ladies were gathering flowers to decorate the church, Miss Strangeworth sent over a great basket of gladioli; when she picked the roses at all, she set them in bowls and vases around the inside of the house her grandfather had built.

Walking down Main Street on a summer morning, Miss Strangeworth had to stop every minute or so to say good morning

to someone or to ask after someone's health. When she came into the grocery, half a dozen people turned away from the shelves and the counters to wave at her or call out good morning.

"And good morning to you, too, Mr. Lewis," Miss Strangeworth said at last. The Lewis family had been in the town almost as long as the Strangeworths; but the day young Lewis left high school and went to work in the grocery, Miss Strangeworth had stopped calling him Tommy and started calling him Mr. Lewis, and he had stopped calling her Addie and started calling her Miss Strangeworth. They had been in high school together, and had gone to picnics together, and to high school dances and basketball games; but now Mr. Lewis was behind the counter in the grocery, and Miss Strangeworth was living alone in the Strangeworth house on Pleasant Street.

"Good morning," Mr. Lewis said, and added politely, "Lovely day."

"It is a very nice day," Miss Strangeworth said, as though she had only just decided that it would do after all. "I would like a chop, please, Mr. Lewis, a small, lean veal chop. Are those strawberries from Arthur Parker's garden? They're early this year."

"He brought them in this morning," Mr. Lewis said.

"I shall have a box," Miss Strangeworth said. Mr. Lewis looked worried, she thought, and for a minute she hesitated, but then she decided that he surely could not be worried over the strawberries. He looked very tired indeed. He was usually so chipper, Miss Strangeworth thought, and almost commented, but it was far too personal a subject to be introduced to Mr. Lewis, the grocer, so she only said, "And a can of cat food and, I think, a tomato."

Silently, Mr. Lewis assembled her order on the counter, and waited. Miss Strangeworth looked at him curiously and then said, "It's Tuesday, Mr. Lewis. You forgot to remind me."

"Did I? Sorry."

"Imagine your forgetting that I always buy my tea on Tuesday," Miss Strangeworth said gently. "A quarter pound of tea, please, Mr. Lewis."

"Is that all, Miss Strangeworth?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Lewis. Such a lovely day, isn't it?"

"Lovely," Mr. Lewis said.

Miss Strangeworth moved slightly to make room for Mrs. Harper at the counter. "Morning, Adela," Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, "Good morning, Martha."

"Lovely day," Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, "Yes, lovely," and Mr. Lewis, under Mrs. Harper's glance, nodded.

"Ran out of sugar for my cake frosting," Mrs. Harper explained. Her hand shook slightly as she opened her pocketbook. Miss Strangeworth wondered, glancing at her quickly, if she had been taking proper care of herself. Martha Harper was not as young as she used to be, Miss Strangeworth thought. She probably could use a good strong tonic.

"Martha," she said, "you don't look well."

"I'm perfectly all right," Mrs. Harper said shortly. She handed her money to Mr. Lewis, took her change and her sugar, and went out without speaking again. Looking after her, Miss Strangeworth shook her head slightly. Martha definitely did *not* look well.

Carrying her little bag of groceries, Miss Strangeworth came out of the store into the bright sunlight and stopped to smile down on the Crane baby. Don and Helen Crane were really the two most infatuated young parents she had ever known, she thought indulgently, looking at the delicately embroidered baby cap and the lace-edged carriage cover.

"That little girl is going to grow up expecting luxury all her life," she said to Helen Crane.

Helen laughed. "That's the way we want her to feel," she said. "Like a princess."

"A princess can see a lot of trouble sometimes," Miss Strangeworth said dryly. "How old is Her Highness now?"

"Six months next Tuesday," Helen Crane said, looking down with rapt wonder at her child. "I've been worrying, though, about her. Don't you think she ought to move around more? Try to sit up, for instance?"

"For plain and fancy worrying," Miss Strangeworth said, amused, "give me a new mother every time."

"She just seems—slow," Helen Crane said.

"Nonsense. All babies are different. Some of them develop much more quickly than others."

"That's what my mother says." Helen Crane laughed, looking a little bit ashamed.

"I suppose you've got young Don all upset about the fact that his daughter is already six months old and hasn't yet begun to learn to dance?"

"I haven't mentioned it to him. I suppose she's just so precious that I worry about her all the time."

"Well, apologize to her right now," Miss Strangeworth said. "*She* is probably worrying about why you keep jumping around all the time." Smiling to herself and shaking her old head, she went on down the sunny street, stopping once to ask little Billy Moore why he wasn't out riding in his daddy's shiny new car, and talking for a few minutes outside the library with Miss Chandler, the librarian, about the new novels to be ordered and paid for by the annual library appropriation. Miss Chandler seemed absentminded and very much as though she were thinking about something else. Miss Strangeworth noticed that Miss Chandler had not taken much trouble with her hair that morning, and sighed. Miss Strangeworth hated sloppiness.

Many people seemed disturbed recently, Miss Strangeworth thought. Only yesterday the Stewarts' fifteen-year-old Linda had run crying down her own front walk and all the way to school, not caring who saw her. People around town thought she might have had a fight with the Harris boy, but they showed up together at the soda shop after school as usual, both of them looking grim and bleak. Trouble at home, people concluded, and sighed over the problems of trying to raise kids right these days.

From halfway down the block Miss Strangeworth could catch the heavy scent of her roses, and she moved a little more quickly. The perfume of roses meant home, and home meant the Strangeworth House on Pleasant Street. Miss Strangeworth stopped at her own front gate, as she always did, and looked with deep pleasure at her house, with the red and pink and white roses massed along the narrow lawn, and the rambler going up along the porch; and the neat, the unbelievably trim lines of the house itself, with its slimness and its washed white look. Every window sparkled, every curtain hung stiff and straight, and even the stones of the front walk were swept and clear. People around town wondered how old Miss Strangeworth managed to keep the house looking the way it did, and there was a legend about a tourist once mistaking it for the local museum and going all through the place without finding out about his mistake. But the town was proud of Miss Strangeworth and her roses and her house. They had all grown together.

Miss Strangeworth went up her front steps, unlocked her front door with her key, and went into the kitchen to put away her groceries. She debated about having a cup of tea and then decided that it was too close to midday dinnertime; she would not have the appetite for her little chop if she had tea now. Instead she went into

the light, lovely sitting room, which still glowed from the hands of her mother and her grandmother, who had covered the chairs with bright chintz and hung the curtains. All the furniture was spare and shining, and the round hooked rugs on the floor had been the work of Miss Strangeworth's grandmother and her mother. Miss Strangeworth had put a bowl of her red roses on the low table before the window, and the room was full of their scent.

Miss Strangeworth went to the narrow desk in the corner and unlocked it with her key. She never knew when she might feel like writing letters, so she kept her notepaper inside and the desk locked. Miss Strangeworth's usual stationery was heavy and cream-colored, with STRANGEWORTH HOUSE engraved across the top, but when she felt like writing her other letters, Miss Strangeworth used a pad of various-colored paper bought from the local newspaper shop. It was almost a town joke, that colored paper, layered in pink and green and blue and yellow; everyone in town bought it and used it for odd, informal notes and shopping lists. It was usual to remark, upon receiving a note written on a blue page, that so-and-so would be needing a new pad soon—here she was, down to the blue already. Everyone used the matching envelopes for tucking away recipes, or keeping odd little things in, or even to hold cookies in the school lunchboxes. Mr. Lewis sometimes gave them to the children for carrying home penny candy.

Although Miss Strangeworth's desk held a trimmed quill pen which had belonged to her grandfather, and a gold-frosted fountain pen which had belonged to her father, Miss Strangeworth always used a dull stub of pencil when she wrote her letters, and she printed them in a childish block print. After thinking for a minute, although she had been phrasing the letter in the back of her mind all the way home, she wrote on a pink sheet: DIDN'T YOU EVER SEE AN IDIOT CHILD BEFORE? SOME PEOPLE JUST SHOULDN'T HAVE CHILDREN SHOULD THEY?

She was pleased with the letter. She was fond of doing things exactly right. When she made a mistake, as she sometimes did, or when the letters were not spaced nicely on the page, she had to take the discarded page to the kitchen stove and burn it at once. Miss Strangeworth never delayed when things had to be done.

After thinking for a minute, she decided that she would like to write another letter, perhaps to go to Mrs. Harper, to follow up the ones she had already mailed. She selected a green sheet this time and wrote quickly: HAVE YOU FOUND OUT YET WHAT THEY WERE ALL

LAUGHING ABOUT AFTER YOU LEFT THE BRIDGE CLUB ON THURSDAY? OR IS THE WIFE REALLY ALWAYS THE LAST ONE TO KNOW?

Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts; her letters all dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion. Mr. Lewis would never have imagined for a minute that his grandson might be lifting petty cash from the store register if he had not had one of Miss Strangeworth's letters. Miss Chandler, the librarian, and Linda Stewart's parents would have gone unsuspectingly ahead with their lives, never aware of possible evil lurking nearby, if Miss Strangeworth had not sent letters opening their eyes. Miss Strangeworth would have been genuinely shocked if there *had* been anything between Linda Stewart and the Harris boy, but as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it. It was far more sensible for Miss Chandler to wonder what Mr. Shelley's first wife had really died of than to take a chance on not knowing. There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in the town. Besides, Miss Strangeworth liked writing her letters.

She addressed an envelope to Don Crane after a moment's thought, wondering curiously if he would show the letter to his wife, and using a pink envelope to match the pink paper. Then she addressed a second envelope, green, to Mrs. Harper. Then an idea came to her and she selected a blue sheet and wrote: YOU NEVER KNOW ABOUT DOCTORS. REMEMBER THEY'RE ONLY HUMAN AND NEED MONEY LIKE THE REST OF US. SUPPOSE THE KNIFE SLIPPED ACCIDENTALLY. WOULD DR. BURNS GET HIS FEE AND A LITTLE EXTRA FROM THAT NEPHEW OF YOURS?

She addressed the blue envelope to old Mrs. Foster, who was having an operation next month. She had thought of writing one more letter, to the head of the school board, asking how a chemistry teacher like Billy Moore's father could afford a new convertible, but all at once she was tired of writing letters. The three she had done would do for one day. She could write more tomorrow; it was not as though they all had to be done at once.

She had been writing her letters—sometimes two or three every day for a week, sometimes no more than one in a month—for the past year. She never got any answers, of course, because she never signed her name. If she had been asked, she would have said that her name, Adela Strangeworth, a name honored in the town for so many years, did not belong on such trash. The town where she lived had to be kept clean and sweet, but people everywhere were lustful

and evil and degraded, and needed to be watched; the world was so large, and there was only one Strangeworth left in it. Miss Strangeworth sighed, locked her desk, and put the letters into her big black leather pocketbook, to be mailed when she took her evening walk.

She broiled her little chop nicely, and had a sliced tomato and a good cup of tea ready when she sat down to her midday dinner at the table in her dining room, which could be opened to seat twenty-two, with a second table, if necessary, in the hall. Sitting in the warm sunlight that came through the tall windows of the dining room, seeing her roses massed outside, handling the heavy, old silverware and the fine, translucent china, Miss Strangeworth was pleased; she would not have cared to be doing anything else. People must live graciously, after all, she thought, and sipped her tea. Afterward, when her plate and cup and saucer were washed and dried and put back onto the shelves where they belonged, and her silverware was back in the mahogany silver chest, Miss Strangeworth went up the graceful staircase and into her bedroom, which was the front room overlooking the roses, and had been her mother's and her grandmother's. Their Crown Derby dresser set and furs had been kept here, their fans and silver-backed brushes and their own bowls of roses; Miss Strangeworth kept a bowl of white roses on the bed table.

She drew the shades, took the rose satin spread from the bed, slipped out of her dress and her shoes, and lay down tiredly. She knew that no doorbell or phone would ring; no one in town would dare to disturb Miss Strangeworth during her afternoon nap. She slept, deep in the rich smell of roses.

After her nap she worked in her garden for a little while, sparing herself because of the heat; then she came in to her supper. She ate asparagus from her own garden, with sweet-butter sauce and a softboiled egg, and while she had her supper, she listened to a late evening news broadcast and then to a program of classical music on her small radio. After her dishes were done and her kitchen set in order, she took up her hat—Miss Strangeworth's hats were proverbial in the town; people believed that she had inherited them from her mother and her grandmother—and, locking the front door of her house behind her, set off on her evening walk, pocketbook under her arm. She nodded to Linda Stewart's father, who was washing his car in the pleasantly cool evening. She thought that he looked troubled.

There was only one place in town where she could mail her let-

ters, and that was the new post office, shiny with red brick and silver letters. Although Miss Strangeworth had never given the matter any particular thought, she had always made a point of mailing her letters very secretly; it would, of course, not have been wise to let anyone see her mail them. Consequently, she timed her walk so she could reach the post office just as darkness was starting to dim the outlines of the trees and the shapes of people's faces, although no one could ever mistake Miss Strangeworth, with her dainty walk and her rustling skirts.

There was always a group of young people around the post office, the very youngest roller-skating upon its driveway, which went all the way around the building and was the only smooth road in town; and the slightly older ones already knowing how to gather in small groups and chatter and laugh and make great, excited plans for going across the street to the soda shop in a minute or two. Miss Strangeworth had never had any self-consciousness before the children. She did not feel that any of them were staring at her unduly or longing to laugh at her; it would have been most reprehensible for their parents to permit their children to mock Miss Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Most of the children stood back respectfully as Miss Strangeworth passed, silenced briefly in her presence, and some of the older children greeted her, saying soberly, "Hello, Miss Strangeworth."

Miss Strangeworth smiled at them and quickly went on. It had been a long time since she had known the name of every child in town. The mail slot was in the door of the post office. The children stood away as Miss Strangeworth approached it, seemingly surprised that anyone should want to use the post office after it had been officially closed for the night and turned over to the children. Miss Strangeworth stood by the door, opening her black pocketbook to take out the letters; and heard a voice which she knew at once to be Linda Stewart's. Poor little Linda was crying again, and Miss Strangeworth listened carefully. This was, after all, her town, and these were her people; if one of them was in trouble she ought to know about it.

"I can't tell you, Dave," Linda was saying—so she *was* talking to the Harris boy, as Miss Strangeworth had supposed—"I just *can't*. It's just *nasty*."

"But why won't your father let me come around any more? What on earth did I do?"

"I can't tell you. I just wouldn't tell you for *anything*. You've got to have a dirty, dirty mind for things like that."

"But something's happened. You've been crying and crying, and your father is all upset. Why can't *I* know about it, too? Aren't I like one of the family?"

"Not any more, Dave, not any more. You're not to come near our house again; my father said so. He said he'd horsewhip you. That's all I can tell you: You're not to come near our house any more."

"But I didn't *do* anything."

"Just the same, my father said . . ."

Miss Strangeworth sighed and turned away. There was so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one, there was still so much evil in people.

She slipped her letters into the slot, and two of them fell inside. The third caught on the edge and fell outside, onto the ground at Miss Strangeworth's feet. She did not notice it because she was wondering whether a letter to the Harris boy's father might not be of some service in wiping out this potential badness. Wearily Miss Strangeworth turned to go home to her quiet bed in her lovely house, and never heard the Harris boy calling to her to say that she had dropped something.

"Old lady Strangeworth's getting deaf," he said, looking after her and holding in his hand the letter he had picked up.

"Well, who cares?" Linda said. "Who cares any more, anyway?"

"It's for Don Crane," the Harris boy said, "this letter. She dropped a letter addressed to Don Crane. Might as well take it on over. We pass his house anyway." He laughed. "Maybe it's got a check or something in it and he'd be just as glad to get it tonight instead of tomorrow."

"Catch old lady Strangeworth sending anybody a check," Linda said. "Throw it in the post office. Why do anyone a favor?" She sniffled. "Doesn't seem to me anybody around here cares about us," she said. "Why should we care about them?"

"I'll take it over anyway," the Harris boy said. "Maybe it's good news for them. Maybe they need something happy tonight, too. Like us."

Sadly, holding hands, they wandered off down the dark street, the Harris boy carrying Miss Strangeworth's pink envelope in his hand.

Miss Strangeworth awakened the next morning with a feeling of

intense happiness, and for a minute wondered why, and then remembered that this morning three people would open her letters. Harsh, perhaps, at first, but wickedness was never easily banished, and a clean heart was a scoured heart. She washed her soft old face and brushed her teeth, still sound in spite of her seventy-one years, and dressed herself carefully in her sweet, soft clothes and buttoned shoes. Then, coming downstairs and reflecting that perhaps a little waffle would be agreeable for breakfast in the sunny dining room, she found the mail on the hall floor and bent to pick it up. A bill, the morning paper, a letter in a green envelope that looked oddly familiar. Miss Strangeworth stood perfectly still for a minute, looking down at the green envelope with the penciled printing, and thought: It looks like one of my letters. Was one of my letters sent back? No, because no one would know where to send it. How did this get here?

Miss Strangeworth was a Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Her hand did not shake as she opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet of green paper inside. She began to cry silently for the wickedness of the world when she read the words: LOOK OUT AT WHAT USED TO BE YOUR ROSES.

For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Author-publisher Joan Drury's latest, **Silent Words** (Spinsters Ink, \$10.95), sends Tyler Jones back to her late grandmother's home on Lake Superior in northern Minnesota to fulfill a dying wish: "Go home [and] shake the skeletons in the closet." As Tyler begins fixing up the old house, she rediscovers childhood friends and launches a search for details of her family's history. But rattling skeletons can prove deadly. This book has it all: a mature and engaging protagonist, local color, and suspense, all woven together with a fascinating backstory that makes it impossible to put down.

Terence Faherty takes readers back to postwar Hollywood and a narrator who's a failed actor turned sleuth in **Come Back Dead** (Simon & Schuster, \$22.95). The year is 1955, and with the rising popularity of television and the breakup of major motion picture studios, one former *wunderkind*—actor/writer/director Carson Drury—has bought back the rights to his second picture and is going to reshoot its ending. Drury has never managed to repeat the enormous critical success of his very first film; this latest project (if he can get the financing) is his last chance for redemption. But as Scott Elliott's boss explains when giving Scott the assignment, someone has begun sabotaging Drury's filmmaking efforts. Faherty has an engaging narrator in Elliott, and the period adds a great deal of charm to this cosy yet familiar premise.

Tony Hillerman's latest, **The Fallen Man** (HarperCollins, \$24), brings Leaphorn out of a restive retirement to work on the mystery of a skeleton found near the summit of Ship Rock. Eleven years earlier the dead man was a thirty-year-old rancher who had inherited a sizable local ranch three days before he disappeared. Leaphorn

had been the investigator then, and thanks to a retainer from the dead man's relatives, he takes on the job again now that the skeleton has been identified. Chee, meanwhile, is struggling with his new administrative job, cultural quarrels with his fiancée, and the familiar feelings of insecurity around the "old man," Leaphorn, his boss for many years. This is one of Hillerman's best, a simple and believable story told in his compelling fashion. Don't miss it.

Donna Huston Murray's **School of Hard Knocks** (St. Martin's, \$5.99) brings back Gin Barnes, the witty and practical suburban mom who stars in this Main Line, Philadelphia, mystery series. This time Gin can't be accused of going out looking for trouble: the mayhem is literally right in her own back yard—or at least, in her own neighborhood. But as is often the way in murder mysteries, petty vandalism and small acts of theft turn into something deadly, and Gin is right in the middle of it. Murray doesn't reinvent anything in this cosy mystery, but instead concentrates on putting together a solid addition to the subgenre of amateur sleuths.

A. J. Holt's **Watch Me** (St. Martin's, \$6.99) is a thriller with a lot going for it. Jay Fletcher is a loner with several degrees (in psych and computer science) who has worked for the FBI for a bit over ten years when something happens that will change her life forever. And thanks to Jay's keen abilities as a crimesolver, her fateful decision to take care of business herself is also going to rearrange the lives of more than a couple of criminals. Holt manages to make his protagonist both sympathetic and appealing, and her journey away from the law into vigilantism is as mesmerizing as her computer hacking skills and her crime-tracking instincts. This isn't for the weak of stomach or for the weak of heart, but it's certainly hard to put down at night.

It isn't fiction, but I suspect that **Mindhunter** by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker will prove irresistible to most mystery readers. The book's subtitle, *Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, promises that Special Agent Douglas, a twenty-five-year veteran of the Investigative Support Unit at Quantico, is going to give his readers an inside look at the man (himself) and the team who were the models for the characters in Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Douglas and Olshaker deliver, providing dozens of anecdotes and true crime vignettes, even adding several about the ones who got away. The book is the true story of a group of pioneering FBI men and women whose research—including hundreds of prison interviews with convicted and serial killers—has led to

methods of profiling such criminals. It concludes with a heartfelt plea to the justice system to evaluate these murderers before paroling them by looking beyond their behavior while in prison to their original crimes and their potential threat to the community, as the data repeatedly proves that serial killers are not being rehabilitated. *Mindhunter* should have a powerful impact. (Pocket, \$6.99)

Teri Holbrook's **The Grass Widow** (Bantam, \$5.50), the second in this series, is an elegantly written suspense novel set in the small community of Statlers Cross, Georgia. Gail has fled England with her small daughter, Katie Pru. She's come back to her grandmother's house, to be surrounded by the people and places she knew from summers spent there as a child, to work on a book of local history, and to escape the scandal in England that left her a widow. But tragedy strikes nearby when the town's patriarch dies of a shotgun blast in his bedroom at the height of the annual town picnic, held on his farm. Gail's narrative voice is compelling and her instincts are sound when she begins looking back in time, back to 1925 and the suicide by hanging that turned Miss Linnie's sad tale into numerous ghost stories that have haunted Gail's family for generations. The reader is mesmerized as she peels back the dusty curtains from her family portraits and ultimately reveals not one but two murderers.

Harold Adams' laconic hero, Depression-era signpainter and peripatetic private eye Carl Wilcox, is back in another of his South Dakota cases in **Hatchet Job** (Walker, \$19.95). A cop from a district near the tiny town of Mustard, South Dakota, has suggested to Mustard's mayor that he hire Wilcox as a temporary deputy to investigate the brutal slaying of one of their less-than-good citizens. Fans of this long-running series have awarded Adams both a Shamus and a Minnesota Book Award for earlier entries, always citing his lean language, engaging protagonist, evocative landscapes, and portraits of an almost forgotten era. He will continue to please fans with this latest tale and should earn some new readers along the way.

THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mysterious by John F. Besnard of New mentions go to Frank Peirce James F. Lydon, Jr., of setts; James Hagerty of Mel-Slater of Dearborn Heights, meyer of Gresham, Oregon; mento, California; Susan Hinecker of San Bernardino, California; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; Margaret Spark of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Carl L. Henderson of Waukegan, Illinois; and Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky.



Photograph contest was won York, New York. Honorable of College Station, Texas; Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts; Lynn John Michigan; Annemarie Evers-Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; Margaret Spark of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Carl L. Henderson of Waukegan, Illinois; and Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

EZ PICKINS by John F. Besnard

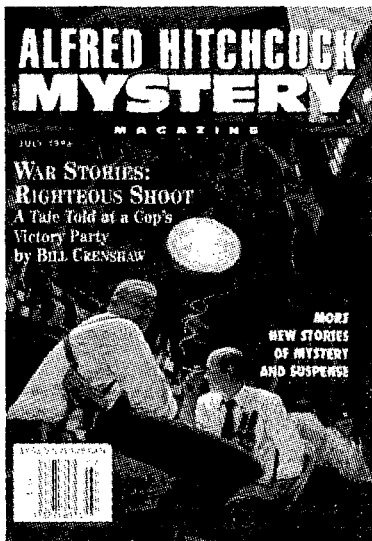
It was chilly, but no one seemed to notice. "T!" we shouted. We all stood and stared, waiting for it to happen again. "H!" we said in unison. Sandra Jackson said it was a miracle in the making, the divine hand of the Almighty at work. "A!" William Jenkins, a computer salesman, said it was the Internet run amok. "N!" Louis Henry, part of the fringe element, said it was aliens trying to establish communication. "K!" I offered up the deft-hand-of-man theory but was shouted down. "S!" As a bus went by, the crowd shuffled to get a better look. "F!"

Beulah Parker voiced her opinion. "O!" She said the occupants of the stately old building had been hypnotized by too much daytime TV. "R!" Mary Cutler just stared, speechless. "T!" Martin McCall called it a phone company conspiracy. "H!"

Do you know the names of all your neighbors that well? "E!" Don't feel bad. "N!" Neither do I. "I!" I pressed the button on the small remote in my pocket. "C!" The lights in the rooms of the building across the street formed another letter. "E!" I released the button. "H!" The lights returned to their normal random pattern. "A!" I picked another pocket. "N!" I peeked at the driver's license. "D!" Jason London, it read. "O!" Jason said he thought it was an elaborate distraction. "U!" He wouldn't know how right he was until he reached for his wallet. "T!"

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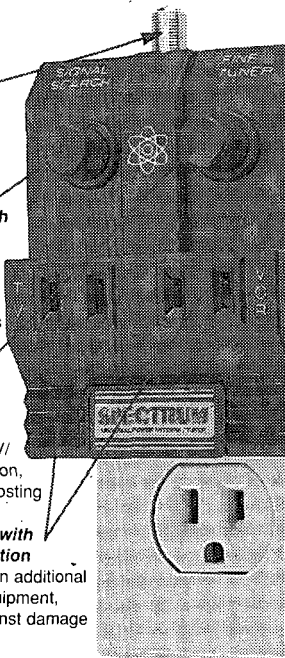
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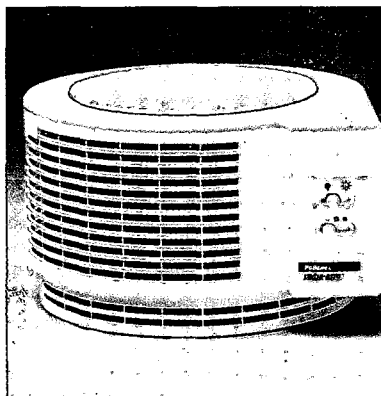
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